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August 28, 1883.

No 198. VOL. VIII. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS

WILMA WILDE; OR, THE INHERITANCE OF HATE.

BY MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON,

AUTHOR OF "ADRIA, THE ADOPTED," "THE TERRIBLE TRUTH," ETC., ETC.



"YOU ARE NOTHING TO ME—NOTHING! YOU WERE CURSED BEFORE YOU EVER SAW THE LIGHT!"

Wilma Wilde;

OR,

THE INHERITANCE OF HATE.

BY MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON,
AUTHOR OF "CORAL AND RUBY," "ADRIA, THE ADOPTED,"
"THE BITTER FEUD," "THE FALSE WIDOW," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

INTO THE SHADOW.

DYING. Alone except for the elfin-faced girl shrinking back into the shadow, awed by the presence creeping closer as the minutes passed, with a greater dread of the hard face outlined against the pillow than she had experienced hitherto, and yet she had never known anything differing from dread and awe of that hard-featured old man, dying there in the late afternoon of the late October day.

A chill, clouded day, with ghostly lights and shades chasing across the outer landscape already sere with heavy frosts. The chill and the clouds were dissolving together as the hours wore on, and a fine mist filled the atmosphere, gathering faster and heavier and breaking with a dash and a burst at last against the dark old house, rattling the windows of the room in which these two waited.

The gray head on the pillow stirred, and two great hollow eyes opened with the vacant stare of half-unconsciousness changing to a vague comprehension as familiar objects about met his sight.

"What was that?" he asked, in a voice sharp and rasping.

"Rain," the girl answered. "A storm has been all the day gathering."

"Rain and storm," muttered the dying man, "rain and storm, devastation, ruin, waste—good! Winds blow, lightnings burn, thunders crash; I can die easier with them tearing their way through the world. Curse the world and all in the world, I say!" The vehemence with which the last words were uttered was appalling, considering how close he was upon that verge of the world which breaks into eternity. It was exhaustive as well, and he caught gaspingly for the breath which gurgled through his throat with a harsh rattle. The girl made haste to put a cordial to his lips which he swallowed with an effort. The hollow eyes glared up at her in a way which sent a shiver curdling the blood in her veins.

"You! Why is not Gerrit here? You know I never want you."

No need to tell her that with all the years of her remembrance passed in the gloomy place, and not one affectionate word which she could recall he had ever addressed to her. She had been an object of aversion to him, banished from his sight sometimes for days together, but always as carefully secluded from contact with that outer world which he was cursing with his dying breath. What a morbidly unhealthy atmosphere for the girl-nature to expand in! One might question if the taint of it would not cling to and corrode the entire after-life. But this girl carried a pathetic appeal stamped on the thin dark features, and looking out of the big, wistful eyes which must have struck a sadder chord than any the careless worldly heart often responds to, a look which might have struck a chill of apprehension in a generous heart, a foreboding of an unhappy life darkling ahead, a desire to ward off the brooding trouble, whatever it might be, from that childish figure, timid and shrinking, still and self-contained with the mastery of habitual reserve.

She answered his harsh words quietly. "Mrs. Gerrit has gone for the medicine which was ordered. It is so near the doctor's hour I think she must be waiting for him. She had no umbrella, and it is raining fast. Shall I sit by your side?—I will be very quiet."

He turned his head slightly with an impatient gesture.

"No, no. Go away out of my sight. God knows there's no comfort in the sight of you; no comfort that you ever came into life, and less loss than even I shall be when you quit it."

She drew back a step, clasping her hands, a quick pallor sweeping across her small dark face.

"Oh, why do you hate me so?" she cried, in a low, breathless way. "Why is there no one in all the world to care for me? Who am I—what am I, that the only being in the world on whom I have any claim can find no comfort that I ever came into life? I must be something to you, or hating me as you do you would not have kept me here. Why am I so kept away from other people; why do you dislike me so, Mr. Gregory; oh, do tell me—why?"

A deepening purplish tint was in the harsh face upon the pillow; his labored respiration was shorter and louder. With an effort he raised himself in the bed, stretching out one quivering hand, his difficult articulation intense with a bitterness which burned every cruel word upon the girl's remembrance with an ineffaceable stamp.

"You are nothing to me—nothing! You were cursed before you ever saw the light. If there be any one in all this world upon whom you have any claim, that one of all living mortals has greatest cause for hate and dread of you. If ever you fancy you have found such a one, tear your own heart out rather than attempt to press any such claim, if you would not call other curses upon the hour you were born. Yours is a dead life. If you ever pray for anything, pray that you may never be the cause of a living death."

He fell back again, pale, trembling, the breath grown faint upon his lips, but this time she did not stir in attempting to revive him. She shrunk back into the deeper shadows, with a dull pain and terror called up by his words, the last of which repeated

themselves again and again in her mind like some threatening danger which her comprehension could not grasp.

"Yours is a dead life; if you ever pray for anything, pray that you may never be the cause of a living death." What could that mean? Why, oh, why had she been born at all, since her very existence must be a curse to herself and to any other who might be allied to her? What a fate to be hers at the time when other lives would be putting forth their best buds of promise, when they would be blossoming with the hope and happiness which only young lives know! She had drawn close to a window and was pressing her forehead against a pane, with those painfully numbing thoughts stirring within her, the raindrops, now falling heavily without, dashing at intervals against the glass and trickling down before the great, mournful, unheeding eyes. If she observed them at all it may have been with a vague fancy that even the clouds were more blessed than she since they could weep and she could not.

She heard the opening door without turning her head, but a moment of silence and an advancing step drew her gaze suddenly that way.

A woman's form was framed in the doorway, which was certainly not the form of Mrs. Gerrit. This shape was tall, and though loosely cloaked, slender and graceful as she could see. A falling veil concealed the face, and while she gazed the form moved swiftly forward across the floor to the bedside to the dying man. His eyes went up with a startled light in them to meet the woman's eyes looking down as she put out a small gloved hand to touch him. Some unintelligible words bubbled up to his lips, but without noticing his apparent effort to speak the unannounced visitor addressed him.

"I heard that you were dying, and I have come once more to ask for those treasures of mine which you took from me long ago. I could have forgiven you all your harshness and all your cruelty more readily than that. They have never been anything to you; they have done you no good; they might be turned to do me harm. For the sake of the tie which should have bound us closer once, will you not give them to me now that you are upon your deathbed?"

The voice was low, clear and sweet, but of such an even intonation that it seemed incapable of conveying jarring emotions. The harsh, aged, wasted face upon the pillow had changed strangely. Some look had come into it which the girl by the window had never seen there before, and which seemed a struggle even at that time between bitterness and yearning, between upspringing tenderness and hard resolve.

"I told you before that I had not kept them, that they were destroyed years ago," he answered, speaking with difficulty but quite distinctly, while his eyes never wavered from her face. "You would have kept them and pored over them, and been discovered at last. I was wise in putting it out of your power to bring harm upon yourself."

"You will not give them to me? I thought if you would ever soften it might me at this hour."

"And you have no pity," he whispered, hoarsely. "It is a mournful, disappointed life which will be ended soon, and its pitiful close does not touch you. Dying alone—as much alone since you have come."

"It is a perverted and willfully wasted life," said the low, steady voice. "Whatever motive may have actuated, or whatever mistaken sense of duty may have prompted, it was a wrong, hard, unsympathetic life from the very first. I cannot find fault with myself for having learned my lesson too well. What I am you made me, and I am no more ice or marble—feelingless—now than you were in the days gone by. I have come on a fruitless mission, but I did not come hopeful, and I shall not go despondent."

She turned from him and a bitter spasm convulsed his features, but he made no motion, and in a second more the heavy lids dropped over his eyes, dimming already with the dead numbness creeping over him. The presence of the girl in the room had not been observed by the visitor, until in turning she caught a glimpse of the slight figure outlined against the dull gray outer light. At the same instant suppressed sounds became audible from without, a door opened and shut, and footsteps came nearer through the bare corridor.

The girl glided silently forward to admit the newcomers to the room, while the lady, sweeping the falling veil closer over her features, stood still, awaiting a passageway. Two persons entered. A tall, thin man in advance whose keen light eyes swept the room and absorbed the situation presented there with a single glance. Following him, the quiet, elderly person who was the one servant of that dull old house. When the chamber door closed it shut the other two out, and the lady paused to drop her hand upon the girl's shoulder.

"Who are you?" she asked abruptly. "How do you come to be here?"

"I am Wilma Wilde, and I live with Mr. Gregory."

"What are you to him?"

"Nothing," he said. "I am nothing to any one in the wide world, so far as I know."

"Not strange since you live here. Yours is not an entirely new experience, Wilma. What will be done with you when he is gone?"

"I don't know. I suppose I shall live on here with Mrs. Gerrit."

"That was she?" with a glance at the closed door.

"Yes."

"And the other?"

"Was Mr. Dallas."

"Ah, well, Wilma; some one will probably look out for you. How dusk it is getting here! Good-by, child."

She touched her gloved finger-tips to the girl's cheek, but so gently and lingeringly that the touch seemed a caress, then walked the length of the bare

corridor and let herself out into the stormy late afternoon without once glancing back. Wilma followed after slowly, her heart swelling and throbbing from that gentle touch, and stood in the entrance-way watching the shape growing dim in the distance. For a moment the rain had almost ceased, and through a rift in the clouds a gleam of yellow sunset touched the sere damp earth and illuminated the upright graceful figure—for a moment only, and then the glow faded suddenly as it had come, and the swift dusk succeeding blotted the retreating shape from her view.

A dash of mist in her face gave Wilma a chill, and she drew back into the corridor, but held aloof from the room where the dying man lay. Mrs. Gerrit came out presently, taking her way to her own more particular domain, and Wilma crept away to her cheerless chamber, feeling the awful silence of the always silent house too oppressive to be borne.

An interval of silence had reigned in the sick-room, broken only by the heavy respiration of the sufferer. A shaded lamp had been placed on a stand at the bed's head, and with his back to it, his face in deep shadow, Dr. Dallas waited for the end which his practiced eye detected to be very close. He was watching as well, those keen light eyes fixed intently upon the patient's face, shaded also, but less obscured than his own. The short heavy sleep into which the other had fallen passed suddenly as it had come. The hollow eyes opened and the gaunt form on the bed raised itself with a spasmodic effort.

"I must do my work," he said, hoarsely. "Give me something to keep up my strength for a moment—only for a moment." The physician put a draught to his lips, but the effort to swallow convulsed the old man with a painful spasm and he pushed it back with a wild fear coming into his face.

"The little desk there," he whispered, pointing waveringly to the article he wished. "Quick, bring it!"

It was brought in an instant. His hands fumbling at his breast brought forth a key suspended on a ribbon from his neck, but his trembling fingers refused to fit it to the lock.

The doctor's deft ones did, however, but even then the sharp light eyes scarcely left his patient's face. A little box within having neither lock nor key came beneath the fumbling fingers, but he was sinking back, the sustaining nerve power was almost gone. He realized this with an agony plainly apparent in the hollow, imploring eyes.

"Let me—see it—burn; let me—" he gasped brokenly. "My God—Quick!" Those light, steady eyes were on him still and the doctor did not move.

"Is there anything more to be done?" he asked.

"Be quick if there is."

"Yes—Wilma. Burn the box—Wilma—guardian."

"You want to name me as Wilma's guardian and I am to burn the box. Yes, I see that is it. Is that all?"

Some unintelligible utterances were checked by the death-rattle in the throat; the gray head fell back; a spasm, a groan, and then utter, eternal stillness of the wasted form.

CHAPTER II.

WAS IT WISE?

BREAKFAST was laid in the morning room of the Richland mansion—one of those modern palaces which lift their stately fronts upon Western avenue in the city of Allegheny. It was a cheery, ruddy room, small rather than the opposite, with a polished black sideboard where silver and crystal threw out cold sparkles vying with other crystal and silver and delicate porcelain disposed upon the snowy fine damask which draped the round breakfast-table.

The table was laid for three, and at precisely the second the little marble clock upon the mantle trembled upon the first stroke of nine, the door turned upon its noiseless hinges to admit the first of these. A middle-aged man having a slight tendency toward obesity, with a ruddy, rather heavy countenance shaved perfectly smooth, bright, calculating eyes under well-arched brows, and brown, short hair brushed smoothly across his heavy forehead. An open, honest countenance was this of the master of the Richland mansion, the face of a man who carried no phases of his life hidden out of sight of the world, one whose self-pride and self-sufficiency were his worst faults.

He stood for a moment rubbing his soft white hands before the bright blaze glowing in the grate, for this was the first day of November, and though clear there was a wintry chill in the air without, and Mr. Richland clung with the persistency of a fixed affection to cheery open fires. He took out his watch and wound it, glancing up at the little clock whose silvery chime had ceased, and turning to face the door as he returned it to his pocket. This was his habitual custom, repeated as often as nine of the morning came around, and varied simply through the different seasons and changes of location. If ever man was rigid in the observance of regular habits, Mr. Richland was open to the imputation.

"Three minutes past," he said to himself. "Mrs. Richland is unusually late this morning. Ethel never is very punctual—Ah, good-morning, my dears! I was remarking it that you are almost behind time for an occasion, Gertrude."

Two ladies had entered together, and a servant making an appearance with the coffee, the little party dropped into their places after an exchange of the customary greetings. Mrs. Richland, younger than her husband by a full decade, was tall, with a slender, graceful shape and languid carriage which matched the quiet repose of her striking face. It was an oval face, the skin marble-white and smooth; eyes, hair and lashes, a soft jetty black; the only

break of color in the firm close lips. If any kindred emotion rivaled Mr. Richland's individual self-sufficiency it was pride of his wife's beauty and culture.

The other, a girl of eighteen, was his sister. Also tall, she lacked half a head of Mrs. Richland's height, and the round supple form may have been a trifle less perfect in its modulations, yet Ethel Richland's was not a beauty to pale even by the side of the other matchless face. Hers was a fair sweet face, framed in by glittering yellow hair confined loosely this morning in a wide-meshed net—the blue cashmere morning robe she wore bringing out the exquisite tints of her fine complexion. Some points of resemblance there were between sister and brother, but so modified that they lay rather in the intangible reminder one sometimes recognizes than in any likeness to be analyzed or defined. A reigning belle of this season scarcely yet opened Miss Richland was, no less so now than when her *debut*, a year before, had created a *furor* not often equaled in the highest circles where the Richlands moved. Sitting at his breakfast-table, that bright morning, with the delicate viands for which he had an epicurean taste before him, with the two lovely contrasting faces on either hand, Mr. Richland felt himself a superlatively contented man.

"And now what may be the newest sensation?" he asked, as he broke his egg with neat dexterity. "You are generally ready with a budget, Ethel. Is there a new star disputing the horizon with you, or does the reaction begin with the first outgoing of the time?"

"Nothing of the kind, brother. A dearth of news perhaps, since I do not recall an item of late intelligence. There will be plenty with next week and the Latham opening."

"Then, for once, fashionable intelligence is behind the times, or one of the pet votaries has dropped voluntarily into our groove. Who do you suppose is back in town, who, after a year's absence, is prepared to be lionized and favoritized in the way some of you ladies lavish upon the Beau Brummel of our date? Guess, my dear?"

"Really," Mrs. Richland's delicate brows arched in a vainly reflective way. "There are so many late tourists putting in an appearance just now that I cannot even hazard a guess."

"And you, Ethel; what have you to say in defense of intuition and presentiments? You should surely have been warned by one or the other. It is Hetherville, Erle Hetherville, Gertrude, and there have been sly thrusts made at me already, hints of sackcloth and ashes for us, and wedding favors at no great distance. How is it, Ethel? Have you young people been outreaching our knowledge of this delicate *affaire de cœur*? Now that is hardly generous when so much of it is due to me."

"I assure you, Howard, this is my first intimation that Mr. Hetherville had returned. Rumor as usual is far too fast. I thought he was not expected until later in the month."

"Youthful impetuosity, I presume."

Mrs. Richland cast a glance of interest across at her young sister-in-law. The fair face opposite might have caught her own usual expression of repose at that moment, so far was it from telling the tale she half-expected to read there. Ethel's eyes were upon her plate, her hand idly playing with her china cup. Much or little as Erle Hetherville might be to her, she was equal to meeting the announcement of his return with unmoved complacency.

"You have seen him?" Mrs. Richland asked.

"Unfortunately, no. He called at the bank, yesterday, after I had left, it appears. Late last night came his note of apology. He is busy with his agent, with a duty trip out of town before he can report here, but will make his own apology in person on the earliest possible occasion."

"He will be quite an acquisition, a general favorite of a year ago, as you recall. Have you any plans for to-day, Ethel?"

"None, I believe." "I have been thinking"—she was addressing her husband again—"if you have no objection, there is a young girl in whom I have taken rather an interest, whose services might be made available in the house. She is an orphan, quite without relatives, I believe."

"Certainly, my dear Gertrude, certainly. You should be assured of my approving any decision of yours, and your generous philanthropy is a credit which I am proud to acknowledge. Any orders of yours I shall be most happy to put into execution."

Fifteen years of wedded life had not tended to make him unobservant of the tender courtesies which too often close with the honeymoon; but society, which ferrets out more of private life than it is always pleasant to find adrift, had long ago tacitly acknowledged that the Richland honeymoon was perennial. Apparently the lady had entertained no doubt of his gracious concurrence.

"You are very kind, but I will not trouble you. I meant to have remarked that I was not proposing the girl's coming here in the capacity of a servant. She was a ward of Mr. Gregory—Matthew Gregory, lately deceased, who resided some miles out on the old Manchester road."

Ethel, listening with no personal interest in the subject, was surprised at the annoyed, impatient shade sweeping into her brother's face—surprised as well at the doubt and questioning in his eyes as they rested for an instant in sharp scrutiny upon his wife. Her dark orbs met the gaze calmly, and her quiet features were not disturbed by a fluctuation from their habitual repose.

"Very well, Gertrude; do as you think best in every thing, of course. Your judgment is to be trusted, my dear."

It was not often that Mrs. Richland troubled him for an opinion on such a minor point, and his last words seemed spoken as an intimation that the sub-

ject dropped there. She was content to let it be so, with the added observation:

"I shall call at your solicitor's during my drive to-day and leave the matter in his hands to be arranged. There may be some legal forms to be observed, though I think not probable. If you care to accompany me, Ethel, you may direct the drive afterward."

Ethel cared sufficiently to signify her acquiescence as they rose from the breakfast-table.

"Will you come into the library, if you are at liberty for a moment?" her brother requested. "I have a word for your private ear which may as well be said now as at any later time."

She cast a quick, apprehensive glance into his face and hesitated with a half-protest.

"Now, Howard? Will you not be detained?"

"My dear, no; I have fully a half-hour at my disposal. Unless you prefer another time, in which case I can defer to you."

She made a gesture of dissent and followed him, a quiver of nervousness upon her, a certain intuition of what manner of interview his request pre-faced.

"I think you must know what there is to be said, Ethel. You know what Erle Hetherville's coming must mean for you. Let me be the first to give you congratulation of the fair prospect which will be speedily yours. I don't know another man to whom I could resign you so willingly."

"But there need be no haste," she protested, faintly. "There is no question of resigning me yet, Howard. I hope you are not wishing to do so soon."

"Only for your own sake. It is my desire and my advice that this marriage which has been in contemplation so long, shall be consummated at the time first named, and that time is nearly here. You are eighteen, Erle is six years your senior, and your betrothal has been of just that length of duration. My courtship occupied just six weeks, and it is by the light of my own experience that I would urge you to flitter away none of the coming years that will be brighter for being shared together."

Holding his head erect, and with the glow of earnestness shining in his honest face, one could comprehend how the man's heart spoke in his words, and what a wealth of peaceful content his own life embraced.

"Erle will come expecting it," he continued after moment, during which she had not made a reply.

I wanted to urge you to let no coy spirit interfere with whatever proposal he may make. There could be no more perfect fitness of things than is exemplified in the case of you two. I believe if any other union in the world can be blissfully complete as mine has proved, yours will be that one. Young and naturally adapted to each other, no circumstance has been wanting to perfect the mutual attraction, nothing will be lacking to make it complete to the end. One possible flaw which I warrant you two have never considered at all, I shall take the precaution to avoid. You have nothing in your own right, my dear Ethel, but Hetherville's bride will have a dower of which she need not be ashamed. There, not a word! it is my privilege to do that much for you, since my little sister was left to fill the place in my heart which must have been a void otherwise. My affection has been fatherly as well as brotherly, I fancy."

"Best and dearest of brothers," she said, softly, her fair face eloquent with love and gratitude. "You would never urge me to any thing which would not forward my happiness, I am sure. You would never ask me to sacrifice that, Howard?"

"I would advise nothing which would not insure it, Ethel. You don't mean, though"—with a wave of doubt and apprehension struggling into his face—"you surely can't mean—"

"I can't and don't mean to disappoint you if I can avoid it, dear brother. I scarcely know what I do mean, except that I am not quite sure of myself or of Erle. I may become so—who knows?—when I have seen him again."

"I think I may be sure of you," Mr. Richland said, with a fond glance down into the fair, wistful face. "A girl's natural shyness, that is all."

Was it all, oh, Howard Richland, wise in your own way as you may have been, but blinded by your own light of fancied secure content?

A small sketch-portfolio lay upon the table by which Ethel was standing, and she turned the loose leaves absently after he had left her, a far-away look in the soft hazel eyes, a closer setting than was habitual to the red lips. One of the leaves fluttered from beneath her hand to the floor. It was the merest outline of a sketch, a masculine head in profile, carefully begun it would appear—a fine, firm outline of feature, bold and clear as seen in even that unfinished pencilling. She stooped to raise it after one glance swiftly averted, and, crossing to the hearth, paused there, the bit of paper held loosely in her fingers, undecided and wavering for a moment.

Was it only girlish shyness that caused her to shrink at thought of Erle Hetherville, then? Oh, Howard Richland, wise in your own belief, generous in your own inflexible way, was it wise and generous of you to prevail upon a child's unreasoning assurance and unthinking consent to your mapping out of the most important steps of her life? But she had consented, she was Erle Hetherville's promised wife, and Erle Hetherville was doubtless here to claim the fulfillment of that standing promise. The indecision and the wavering seemed to pass; the paper held so loosely dropped without any apparent effort from her into the grate, where a low fire smoldered.

A few hours later the two ladies settled back amid the azure cushions of the barouche, enjoyed the fresh air and mellow sunshine of the bright fall day.

"Will you wait?" Mrs. Richland asked, as, obedient to her order, the carriage was brought to a stand before the tall building, where the lawyer's office was sandwiched in between numerous other offices of more or less pretentious appearance. "I will be back in five minutes, or, less perhaps."

"I shall wait here then, of course. Take your own time, Gertrude."

Ethel could not have told whether it was five minutes merely or five times five that passed before her sister-in-law's return. She had fallen into a reverie with the sounds of the street unheeded about her when Mrs. Richland's voice spoke at her side.

"I was longer than I intended, but I think I shall not need to plead an excuse. I am fortunate in chancing upon an old friend of ours. Miss Richland, there is certainly not a possibility of your having forgotten Mr. Lenoir."

Ethel lifted her eyes with the slightest start, a light of surprise in their hazel depths, a soft glow coming into her cheeks as she saw in the face before her the original of that imperfect sketch which crisped on the library coals so few hours ago.

CHAPTER III.

AFTERNOON AT THE RICHLANDS.

"Miss RICHLAND may not have estimated the number of weeks since we clambered over the mountain heights together, but I trust to her leniency to spare me the pain of utter forgetfulness."

"I should be sorry to claim a memory so short-reaching as that, and this meeting is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Lenoir. And you are looking better for those wild scrambles over the rough roads, or is it the time since has lent the improvement of that bronze and health tinge?"

She leaned forward to give him her slim, gloved hand, and a bright smile, which seconded the pleasure she had expressed.

"The entire time, I think; I am only back from the country these past two days. You saw me first in my most spectral gauntness after a hard season of hard work and a siege of fever to follow it. I am my natural self again, thoroughly rejuvenated. To drop self, are you finding it very dull in the semi-unsettled state which prevails until the season is fairly ushered in?"

"We possess that happy faculty of seldom admitting dullness. I think Howard is careful to leave no room in the household for that perverter of all natures."

"To guard still further against the chance, can we not prevail upon you to favor us with your companionship for the rest of the day? We are two lonely females, drifting without aim or object just now, and it will be a pleasure to dispense with formalities by introducing you direct to our place upon Western avenue. You surely cannot refuse to return and dine with us, Mr. Lenoir?" Mrs. Richland's invitation was cordially given, but it is to be questioned if Ethel's smile and glance did not weigh most in the scale where his momentary indecision balanced. She almost doubted if it had been indecision he was so positive, despite the unmistakable regret of his response.

"Impossible opportunities are always doubly enticing, I think. This one is too brilliant to be tempted by any dereliction of duty, and you will pardon the necessity which demands my declining your kindness with warmest thanks. I am back to duty again on the editorial staff of one of our dailies; I have cultivated the habit of reading my own proofs, and am satisfied there are some at this moment awaiting my attention. After a season of unworied pleasuring I must pin close to my post for a time."

"Let us see, then, if we cannot effect a compromise between inexorable duty and our brief expectations for the afternoon. Suppose we call for you an hour or two from this? We can drive, meantime, or find other amusement until you are at liberty. When and where shall we call for you, Mr. Lenoir?"

"You are too kind, Mrs. Richland; and the trouble—"

"Please don't attempt to make another objection. Gertrude can be persistent when she likes, and to change the old order of things this once, consider us at your service for the afternoon. It is not like our friend of the mountains to turn disobliging." The trifle of imperiousness was that of the belle who was accustomed to have her wish recognized as law, and said as plainly as words might have done—"You will come because I wish it." The glance of appeal was all sweet and shy and womanly, irresistible to him as the soft light of those hazel eyes had been to others many and many a time.

"I would be a churl to refuse after such gracious condescension. I am happy to accept, Mrs. Richland, and I will be at liberty within the hour. The editorial rooms are just opposite, the reading room below."

"In an hour then. And in the meantime, Ethel, did you mention the Industrial Fair? As well there as anywhere."

The carriage rolled on, but there was a misty picture before Lenoir's mind still of a pearly face and soft, appealing eyes, and tiny spirals of bright hair clinging to the temples—a picture which was dissipated as a hand descended by no means lightly upon his shoulder.

"Sky-gazing, Lenoir? More profitable than sky-larking perhaps, but not precisely the occupation to suit our chief just now. So you are acquainted with *la belle invincible*?" It was a reporter from his own office who had addressed him so unceremoniously.

"With whom, Crayton?"

"The Richland, to be sure. She deserves the title if any one does. Circe herself never wove more subtle spells. I wonder if I need to tell you how fatal her reign has been?—how doubly fatal, since to fall a victim once is to exemplify the old tale

of the moth and the flame; the fascination endures to the end, always a fatal end to the silly moth."

"You need to give me the first evidence that Miss Richland merits the character you have ascribed to her through any willful or intended trifling. It is not so hard to imagine her the worshiped among men and the envied among women."

"My dear fellow, are you susceptible to friendly advice? I have a fancy you may need it yet—beware of the flame! You can never be more mistaken in life than in hanging your faith upon outward appearances. She is the greatest coquette, the most heartless flirt and unmerciful despot of the day, and to have that truthfully averred is to have gained notorious celebrity among the coquettes, flirts and despots, of our twin-cities, that I tell you. Better to trust yourself to the tender mercies of sharpers and knaves than to have fallen—"

"Than to have fallen into the unpardonable error of discussing a lady acquaintance in the street—moreover one whose simple acquaintance is an honor conferred on a poor literary hack with sense enough not to presume upon it. It strikes me that these floating 'they says,' from which you have gathered your opinion doubtless, have little or nothing to do with our business, Crayton."

"Mistaken again," the reporter answered, with imperturbable calmness. "Every thing belongs to our business, my boy, even to the private opinions and public appearances of these two fair beings just gone, and all others of the same class. Bless you! Jenkins would be lost without them, which reminds me that our Jenkins has an item in to-day's issue, with a hope of lengthening it indefinitely, and all regarding the invincible Richland. Like this: 'A rumor is afloat that the brave, lucky and handsome Mr. E—H—, lately returned from his stately country home and wide possessions in the very heart of fertile, enticing Maryland, is soon to fulfill the expectations of his friends by blending the matrimonial honors with his otherwise already perfect felicities. The fair lady of his choice has been a favorite since last season, the lovely Miss E—R—,' with further reference to her charms and hints of her conquests, *ad infinitum*."

"And probably as correct as two-thirds of such notices are nowadays. No wonder the fashionable public has decried them as intolerable nuisances," Lenoir answered, chillingly. Crayton gave him a sharp glance, half-knowing and half-pitying.

"Reserve your detestation of the nuisance for Jenkins then, or better still run in a square or so in sympathetic condolence with the injured public. That wouldn't be consistent perhaps, but effective certainly from the pen of Justin Lenoir. Trust Jenkins in his harmless range to make much out of little, but never give me the cold shoulder on his account, my dear fellow."

They had walked slowly side by side across the square and ascended the steps leading to the editorial rooms. Crayton turned in one direction as he spoke, and Lenoir passed through to his own desk. Somehow all the brightness and misty glory of the day had passed away from him. There was a painful contraction in his forehead—a broad, intellectual forehead it was, his features firm and fine, the rather thin, dark face full of nervous power and energy. Though his eyes were fixed upon the proofs of his own articles awaiting him, it was a moment before he recalled his thoughts to his task.

"Is she all the world says of her?" he was thinking. "Whether or no, why should it be anything to me? Have I forgotten myself so far as to have need of Crayton's warning? I have had the warning at any rate and it remains for me to profit by it." And there Justin Lenoir turned to his work with a will that for the time left him too absorbed to admit perplexities.

There was only the softest glow roseate lingering in the Richland parlor. The light filtered over the two forms drawn close to one of the west windows, talking in softened tones together, and watching the glitter of a little gilded cross surmounting the spire of a small gray chapel, all but the dome of which already lay in the shadow. Mrs. Richland had withdrawn for a moment. Her husband had not made his appearance yet, and the cook had remarked twice to William Thompson, the footman, that in ten years she had served in the family no three dinners had spoiled through waiting for the master.

The two left in the parlor together had felt the embarrassment of that constrained silence which may drop for an instant upon the most self-possessed belle of the season, the most brilliant and promising young journalist of the times; a silence which Ethel broke by rising and crossing to her present position.

"I am sure you will agree with me in thinking it a pity to ruin the effect of this lingering sunset by ordering lights for a few moments yet. The peaceful quiet of this time and the tinted atmosphere always remind me of the 'dim religious light,' as I saw it once streaming through painted windows over kneeling forms in St. Paul's. I was a very little child, but I think I shall never forget the strains of soft distant music swelling and rising in a grand pean, or the vivid solemnity of the chant ringing from column to column and echoing through the vast space. The music of our own churches has never seemed so complete."

He joined her, speaking of the various cathedrals of the world, their architecture and adornment, and remarking how impossible it is to point out the fine line of demarcation which separates the perfection of sensuous delights of eye and ear from the enthusiastic fervor of the spirit service in religious devotees.

Listening to his rich, low voice, her earnest eyes looking out to the golden sparkle of the little cross, perhaps that same doubt of herself to which she had given imperfect utterance that very morning, stirred again in her breast. She did not hear the opening

door—they were all orderly, uncreaking doors in the Richland mansion—nor the double footfall on the thick velvet pile, heard nothing until her brother's voice broke suddenly audible at her back.

"Ethel, are you too absorbed to welcome another friend, an unexpected friend, after my communication of the morning, and I assure you I had trouble enough to secure him, unflattering as the fact may seem to you."

Ethel turned, and at the same instant the gasoliers were set ablaze with the full glare shining down upon the little group.

Another gentleman who had entered with Mr. Richland stood there; a handsome, blonde face looked down from his superior height upon her, a pair of bold, laughing blue eyes seemed to be finding audacious amusement in the conscious guilty look springing into hers.

"Miss Richland will believe me that the difficulty was not of my making. If she could know how I have sacrificed my impatient inclinations to the rigid consultation of an exact conscience she would applaud rather than reprove."

"With the support of that approving conscience you did quite properly to consult your own convenience, Mr. Hetherville. Nevertheless I am glad that the opportunity of giving you greeting has not been indefinitely postponed, as we were led to expect. And here is Gertrude ready to add her more weighty assurance to mine."

"First let me present Mr. Lenoir, Mr. Hetherville. According to all rules of contrast you two ought to be excellent friends."

Two minutes afterward Ethel went out to dinner on the arm of this tall, blonde young man, this scion of the old school aristocracy whose family possessions, coming down through five generations, were seized by voracious Jenkinses in furnishing substance for those items of morbid interest which feed the minds of the envious hangers-on of that little central hub of society, about which the circles widen and widen until they are lost at last in the vulgar current of the masses.

"A frightfully demoralized scion, I am afraid," Mr. Erle Hetherville was accustomed to say in his cheery, off-hand fashion. "I find the family dignity a burden too mighty to be borne by these tender and inexperienced shoulders"—giving said shoulders a whimsical shrug, and looking in his six feet of well-developed manhood fully equal to the bearing of a burden of far greater reality than the old family dignity he laughingly deplored.

The gentlemen were still at table after the ladies had left them, when a card was brought to Mrs. Richland. She had sunk back in an easy-chair, and with a languid glance at the name looked across at her sister-in-law.

"Have you any objection to my seeing him here, Ethel? The person is a stranger to me, a professional gentleman, Dr.—ah!—Dr. Craven Dallas"—with a reference to the card.

"No objection whatever, Gertrude. I was about to excuse myself in case it was a private interview desired."

"Don't think of going, my dear. These strange callers are very apt to turn out bores, and I have a presentiment that this one will prove such."

The visitor bowed himself in, a tall, thin man, very sallow, with sparse sandy hair and keen, light gray eyes which swept the entire surface of his observation at a glance, and fixed themselves with peculiar intentness upon Mrs. Richland's face.

She glanced up without rising.

"Will you be seated, Mr. Dallas?"—with a wave of her hand, indicating a chair—"and pardon me for reverting at once to the object of your visit. I am at liberty only for a brief time."

"It is in reference to a communication I received from your solicitor, madame, when I chanced to drop in upon him this afternoon. I am guardian to the young girl, Wilma Wilde."

"Her guardian! I understood she had been left without a guardian."

The keen, light eyes glanced guardedly toward Ethel, but wandered back to their subtle inspection of Mrs. Richland's quietly unconscious attitude, of the slightly weary face so perfect in its repose, the white hands lying idly in her lap, the soft, dark orbs finding so little to interest her about him that they simply turned their languid surprise upon him and went back to the space before her.

"I was appointed her guardian after the late Matthew Gregory. I am most anxious to acquit myself of the trust in a manner to satisfy my own perceptions of right and to meet the confidence reposed in me by my old friend."

"Am I to understand then that you object to my proposal regarding the girl?" The soft, black eyes met his fully for the first, the listlessness was stirred by a little faint bewilderment rather than any disappointed expression.

"I am not sure that I object, Mrs. Richland; in fact it might not be wise for me to object. I hope I do not appear too zealous in assuring myself that this is the best advantage offering to Wilma before I can give my consent. I am a bachelor, maintaining a bachelor's primitive establishment, and it is quite out of the question that I should receive her there. I have been thinking that the child may need schooling; she has not had many opportunities, poor thing! along with my friend who grew misanthropic toward the last. She has nothing at all, as Mr. Gregory, against my wishes I assure you, willed his little property to me; but no pecuniary trifle should stand between me and her best welfare."

"You are very considerate," said the lady, quietly. "I explained to my lawyer that my intention was to give the girl all ordinary reasonable advantages. She will occupy no stated position in the household, though I shall expect her to hold herself in obedience to my own and Miss Richland's wishes. The

solicitor, who is fully instructed I have no doubt, can give you any satisfaction you require. You may like to think further of the matter, in which case you can report your decision to him. Of course I should assume all expense in receiving her."

"I could not consent to relinquish my guardianship or occasional communication with my ward. Assured of those points, I am quite willing that Wilma shall be received into your household—quite positive that a lady of Mrs. Richland's generosity and kindness will be nothing which is not considerate toward the friendless orphan."

"For the time, upon those or any terms. I became interested through hearing of her utter desolation, perhaps I mentioned. Should the first arrangement prove unsatisfactory in any point, the freedom of retreating from it may be wisely accorded. That is sufficient, I hope."

"All-sufficient, my dear madame. And, by the by"—with another glance toward Ethel, simply unobtrusive of them, as he rose to go—"I believe you visited my friend when he was too low to be intelligibly consulted on any matter. He was intrusted with considerable independent business at one time, and his papers have all reverted to me. If any point was left unsettled I may be able to attend to it."

"You are mistaken," Mrs. Richland answered, her dark eyes opening in cool surprise. "Some other visitor, perhaps. I had not the pleasure of any dealing with the late Mr. Gregory."

"Ah—strange! Let me beg that you will pardon the mistake." With a few more words Dr. Craven Dallas bowed himself out, and Mrs. Richland turned her quiet face toward her sister-in-law.

"You are something of a physiognomist, I believe, my dear. What is your opinion of that man?"

Ethel gave an expressive little shudder.

"He is a person I never could tolerate with any degree of composure, I fancy. He looks to have the inclination of a sycophant; he is cunning and insincere, I am sure."

"My impression of him was almost the same," Gertrude said, slowly. To herself she added—"It was like coming into contact with the slimy coil of a serpent."

CHAPTER IV.

TOO MUCH CONFIDENCE.

"AND you will not be here for next week's entertainments, Mr. Hetherville! Not for Lotta, nor the Clinton dinner, nor the Latham reception, which last will be recognized as the positive opening of the campaign. And how heroically you appear to bear up under the weight of disappointment that degree of sacrifice must necessarily impose! Your masculine stoicism puts our little feminine logic to shame; we could not willingly turn our backs upon such an alluring programme."

It was Ethel speaking. They were grouped in the parlor still. Mr. Richland in his easy-chair before the fire had lapsed into drowsy unconsciousness of all but the genial warmth and the low murmur of voices that blended in with the dreams floating mistily through his mind. His wife was looking at some stereoscopic views with Justin Lenoir, while Miss Richland was engaged *te-te-te* with the blonde young Marylander, whose blue, bright eyes, and rippling golden beard, and general easy nonchalance had worked as much havoc in his own field, as Miss Richland's feminine charms had effected in hers.

"I shall miss them—yes, but I am not without solace. The greater attraction of the three, Lotta, remains, and I have my return for the sacrifice before it is made. But for Mr. Richland's persistent interposition I should be lodged in a little sleepy village up in Westmoreland county now, where a queer old aunt of mine has the odd taste to make her abode. She has a vast amount of superfluous energy which couldn't be better employed than in overawing her humbler neighbors by the state she maintains, and by turning Lady Benefactress to the villagers, who submit with less protest than might be supposed. She is a dear old soul, under all her vagaries, and quite fond of me, with reason or in spite of it as you like. She would never forgive the oversight if I neglected paying my respects before launching upon the tide here, and she is sure to let me off with not less than a week, by which time the odor of my offensive cigar in the scrupulous sanctity of her household precincts, my odd fowling-pieces, resurrected to temporary service, my horrid man's carelessness and general ungainliness wear the good old lady's patience down to that fine edge when she is willing to see me depart with a sigh which mingles regret with sublime reconciliation. The sacrifice, which is no very great sacrifice, after all, is the delay of my journey for a day, which will throw my return just too late for the last attraction on your list, the Latham reception. I am more than consoled by the thought of the hundred following receptions, all likely to be as much of a jam, where one sees the same people and hears the same remarks, and eats the same indigestible conglomeration of salads and creams, confections, ices and pastry, and generally tops off the matter by imbibing too freely of New Jersey champagne, and wakes next morning with the identical headache, the same good resolutions which go off with the headache—all of which have been a recurring experience a hundred times before. Pray don't commiserate me upon the loss of that delightful prospect."

"You forfeit your right to any commiseration by viewing such a phase of it. But then it is characteristic of Mr. Hetherville to be independent of all considerations."

"You are too severe; I disclaim most emphatically in individual cases—yours for instance. You can't question that I am anxious to propitiate myself in your favor, Ethel. You don't imagine that I

have been anything but eager to break the strain of reserve which has been holding me afar off from my tiny lady-love of six years ago? I find it almost hard to reconcile the noted, quoted Miss Richland now with the joyous little Ethel of that time; I wonder if you realize all the difference?"

A quick nervous dread was under all her complacent quiet, a dread which was touched by that change in his light, careless manner to one earnest and tenderly reflective, more nearly approaching the tenor of the thoughts she felt must be dwelling in his mind.

"I should hope for a difference," she answered, hastily, "from the silly little hoyden in pinafores of those old recollections. If you have any regard for my feelings, pray spare those obscure reminiscences which will not gain in their resurrection. There, Mr. Lenoir has reached the last of those no doubt vastly entertaining views, and Gertrude I know is waiting to make inquiry of all our Maryland friends, and to compare notes in disposing of the time to come."

"I am at Mrs. Richland's service after one moment. You have not forgotten, Ethel; you wear my ring yet, the ring which was so much too large when you tried it first. The time which was agreed upon by my father and your brother, who were interested in and desirous of aiding this final consummation, has come close at last. I had my own reasons for remaining quite out of your society in this year past. I wanted you, of your own unbiased judgment, to determine if your woman's heart could wholly and freely second your childish choice. I say this to you to-night because in strict honor I can not defer longer than my next visit here speaking to your brother upon this subject, which I have cherished first in my thoughts—tenderly cherished it—for six years past. If you can assure me that your heart has not wavered from the letter of truth spoken in that childish betrothal, if no other love has usurped the place of that attachment of long ago, my happiness and my pride will be complete when I have truly gained—my wife. I want you, Ethel; and Hetherlands is sadly in need of its future mistress. Have I your permission to consult your brother—your assurance that no flaw will mark the perfectness of our long-laid plans?"

The blonde, manly face was handsomer in its tender earnestness; the flashing, mocking blue eyes had grown still and deep, and the hand into which he had drawn hers, wearing his ring, was close and firm in its clasp—strong and tender and true as she knew his nature was; there could be no exception taken to Erle Hetherville as he presented his cause in such plain, deliberate words. More unimpassioned, one might have thought, than the full of his aroused earnestness should warrant; but then this prospect had been one of daily consideration with him for years past, and if a little folly is indispensable in romantic love-making, their folly and their romancing had occurred six years ago, when the boy of eighteen and the girl of twelve had been thrown together in an old Maryland homestead, and turned their whole souls, as they fondly fancied, their silly heads and susceptible young hearts it is very sure, to the pretty farce which in their case had been made abiding by the delighted approbation of other older heads.

After one swift glance Ethel's eyes had been persistently downcast. A little pallor displaced the bright rose-flush which had lingered in her cheeks; a little weight pressed upon her heart and seemed to still the warm blood which had thrilled there. With those clear, bold and tender eyes upon her, with her brother's words of the morning—"I think I can be sure of you, Ethel," ringing in her hearing again, what could she do, what could she say, but give that consent they were both confident in expecting from her!

She spoke, and her voice sounded to her own ears like a tone far off and independent of herself. Her words did not seem of her own volition, they were so broken and unintelligible, until his face bent closer and his firmer pressure of the hand he held interpreted them to her.

"You have never thought of doing other than fulfilling your part—Heaven bless you, darling! And I never had a real fear that you would fail, Ethel." He loosed the little hand, and while she was still in that mazy trance, which doubts the reality of all around, he had turned to speak gayly across the room to the other two just leaving their places by the book-strewn side-table.

Mr. Richland, waking suddenly out of his nap, they formed one central group after that, and at a later hour the two young men took their leave together. They had been tempted to linger late, and the gas burned with a dull glare now in the silent streets. A policeman pacing his lonely beat glanced that way as the two descended the wide white steps, touched his cap and passed on down the long line of alternate blocks of light and shade. At the first corner Lenoir paused, saying:

"I hope you regret heartily, as I do, the fact that my way takes me off in this diverse direction. Do you cross the river, may I ask?"

"Yes; I am staying at the Monongahela now. My old lodgings are something out of repair, with no prospect of being ready for days yet. A bore to live in apartments, but better than to be at the mercy of a set of knavish hangers-on in an establishment of one's own."

Lenoir, with a very correct fancy in his mind of what aspect this luxury-loving, lavish-fortuned young gentleman's apartments might present in extravagant detail, smiled and turned back, checking the words of good-night which had trembled upon his lips.

"Second inspirations are often the best, and if you do not object, I will change my route and attend you far as the bridge. It is a long, lonely walk at this time of night."

"My dear fellow, I positively do object if your way lies in that other direction. It strikes me that the long, lonely walk might be longer and lonelier by the time you made the return. It is now five minutes of twelve," glancing at his watch by the light of the street lamp near which they had paused, "time that honest men were in their own quarters, when thieves do walk and deeds of darkness shall be done. I don't fancy that either are in waiting in this quiet and eminently respectable neighborhood, and I feel quite equal to the task of taking care of myself if they were. Take a cigar to cheer your way, Mr. Lenoir, and let me hope to welcome you to my quarters when I'm once established there."

Lenoir took the cigar and turned his own way, glancing back to see Hetherville still standing in the circle of light, puffing slowly at his own weed—a tall, well-built manly figure as defined there, his frank, open face, with its rippling luxuriant golden beard in full sight, his dark overcoat, fastened by a single button, letting the gleam of the diamond pin refract in broken darts, while a costly ring sparkled upon the hand from which he had removed his glove to reach his cigar-case.

"Brave and honorable, rich and handsome," Lenoir thought. "What woman's heart would fail to be won by him?"

Hetherville, lacking his eulogistic attributes, was thinking something in not an utterly dissimilar strain.

"I fancy I am one of the luckiest among men," he reflected. "With such a fair, sweet bride to finish off other excellent advantages, I ought to be the happiest of men, and shall be, of course."

It is not probable that there was a quail of doubt stirring Mr. Hetherville's mind at that moment. Earnestly in his heart he believed that the devotion which had been nurtured and kept blossoming through these past six years was the one passion which could widen to complete his after life—a passion grown calm long ago; but then, all passions cool, he assured himself, and this was the calm of lasting, peaceful contentment.

It had been five minutes of twelve when he paused in that circle of light. At a quarter past, the watchman, returning on his beat, stopped suddenly in the block of shade lying beyond, and stooped down over a dark, moveless body stretched upon the pavement, the unconscious face turned toward the sky, a little trickle of blood dabbling the bright hair and staining the stone beneath.

Erle Hetherville, shorn of his pride and his strength in that brief interval, with sparkling ring and gleaming diamond pin, and costly gold chronometer, with kindred valuables, gone from his person, and ominous purple marks appearing upon his throat, from which his collar had been torn away.

CHAPTER V.

THE ELF-FACE.

ERLE HETHEVILLE opened his eyes with a feeling of intense languor, with a sense of pressure upon his brain, but except that, with no painful or disagreeable impression in his physical sensations—with only the laziest and pleasantest impressions mistily apparent to his mind. His head was pressing dainty lace-ruffled pillows, his eyes opened upon white filmy draperies and a blending of blue-and-gold beyond, which were surely not natural to his room at the Monongahela. Neither was this quiet chamber, with some soft, sweet perfume just perceptible in its atmosphere, one of his own suite of handsome apartments he had ordered prepared. It came to him slowly that this was a totally unfamiliar place. He made a vague attempt to remember how he had come there, but with the effort lost sight of misty draperies and blue-and-gold tints beyond, faint perfume and strange, indistinct objects about him. Then, in a dreamy way, he had found the blue-and-gold again in floating, cloudy forms, and very much nearer and clearer, but looking out from them down upon him a face like no other face he had ever seen, unless, perhaps, in other dreams.

An elf-like face, with wistful, pathetic, pitying eyes, that gave him a thrill as of something intangibly mournful about her, even in his dream. A soft, cool little hand fell upon his forehead, brushing back the clusters of thick bright hair, and with that, face and clouds vanished, but the cool, soothing touch lingered still. When he found himself again, there was subdued lamp-light in the room. The reign of quiet was broken at his first movement, as his head turned, and his wide eyes unclosed with the vague wonder in them deepening to amazement as a stiff little rustle of silk heralded the uprising of an erect, spare form stationed by his bedside.

"My dear aunt Erle!" said his weak, surprised voice. "Then I am in Westmoreland, after all?"

"Bless my dear boy, he knows me at last. And he is not going to have a fever, or a relapse, or anything of the sort, so there must be no agitation and no effort. Awake and sensible and hungry—I do hope you are hungry, Erle. It's the best of signs."

"Be comforted by the best of signs then, my dear aunt; I'm voracious as though I hadn't had a mouthful for a week. I'm puzzled to know how I came here and how everything seems metamorphosed, and how to account for all the weird fancies I've been having. Did I come with an incipient fever throwing me helpless on your hands from the first? I'm just rational enough to know that I've had an illness of some description."

"But you're not here and you didn't come—I mean that you did come, but you are not here—we are not in Westmoreland, at all, that is. How the boy is talking, and I positively cannot permit him to say another word. He is just to have some chicken-broth and go to sleep again, and have no worry in his poor brain till he has a little more strength. There, not a word; I should know. I imagine."

He was quite content to be silent as the stiff silk rustled away. He heard her speak at the door of the room, and a moment after she came back with a little tray covered with a snow-white napkin. Notwithstanding his assertion of a voracious appetite, it was almost satiated by a sight of the delicate, light little lunch. The attempt to lift his head brought a dizzy whirl and a sense of faintness he had not experienced in his quiet state.

"I insist, Erle! you must be obedient. You must sip the broth I give you, with a mouthful of bread and a little wine, but for these other things you are not to think of them at all. Just like the generality of people to send up a lot of syllabubs for a sick man, as though his stomach was governed by a contrasting rule from the rest of his body."

When the tray had been sent away again, and she resumed her seat by the bedside, his eyes, quite untouched by any symptoms of sleepiness, came back from their interested survey of the room to rest inquiringly upon her face.

"I'm coming back slowly, aunt Erle. I've got as far as a circle of light under a street-lamp, but there I'm stuck. Do give me a lift out of the mire."

"You were garroted and robbed, and the policeman who found you—poor, dear fellow!—senseless and helpless, brought you back here to Mrs. Richland's. They sent word to me; I came, of course, and here we have been ever since, and that's all of it in a nutshell."

"And that 'ever since' has been how long?"

"A week—just. And now not another word. Somebody has been asking for you, and I shouldn't be surprised if somebody came in to see you, if you are not tired or asleep, before she goes to the ball."

"Somebody" did come—Ethel Richland, in her rich evening dress, all white and *decollete*, with jewels sparkling at every turn, the purest, sweetest, fairest vision surely to grace the Latham reception that night.

"The favorable report I have heard of our invalid is all true. How rejoiced I am to know you are fairly recovering, Erle. You ought to recover if faithful attendance and rigid observance of the physician's orders of seclusion and quiet can enforce that end. Since Miss Erle's arrival you have had the most indefatigable of nurses, and we less efficient ones must admit the wisdom which has banished us in her favor."

"Odd how our sick vagaries affect familiar faces, is it not, and how vivid the workings of a distempered fancy? I could sketch out a face I saw lingering over me looking out of floating clouds. So kind aunt Erle took sole possession of me? I should have known it through the mere fact of finding her here. At least I am glad that I have not been a tax utterly upon the generous consideration of your brother's household."

"Don't imagine that we submitted to the extreme letter of the law which would have banished us entirely. I thought you presented the appearance of being half-awake and half-conscious when I was here, some three hours ago. Miss Erle has flattered me more than once by trusting you to my watchfulness for a half-hour or so when she could be persuaded to leave this chamber."

Mrs. Richland came quietly in at that, also in evening dress, and with solicitous inquiry after the invalid.

"So kind of you to give me a glimpse of all your magnificence," he said, from his propped-up position among the pillows. "Even enforced confinement, that breeder of general discontent, does not tempt me to quarrel with my present delightful location—apart from the disability attending—or to envy you. A pleasant evening, ladies; a triumphant evening to you, *la belle Ethel*. It is quite the proper thing for me to wish it you, as whether or no you can not fail to realize it."

"Was my elf-face a dream-fancy only?" he asked himself, as he watched them depart. "I could no more imagine Ethel's fair face appearing like that than I could fancy aunt Erle changed, young and strange, and with such mournful traces in the big dark eyes and weirdly sweet young face. I wonder if dreamland will conjure that fancy up again."

Dreamland failed to do so, either then or afterward, except in vague, elusive ways which no sooner took that form than they faded into air again, or wavered like a will-o'-the-wisp just beyond the power of his comprehension to grasp.

"And now," said aunt Erle, three days after this, "you are well enough quite to sit up in your room. You shall go down to the parlor to-morrow, provided you conduct yourself properly meanwhile."

"You don't know how pleasant this being an invalid proves itself," protested her nephew, lazily. "Upon my word, I am not sure that I don't owe a debt of gratitude to the unknown party or parties who manifested their kind regard for me in such a deucedly close-handed manner. I'm not at all sure but I can forgive them that, after experiencing these new sensations of comfort—this having my wishes anticipated before they come to be wishes, the exercise of the whole household's ingenuity to keep me amused. You should all be highly gratified by your grand success. Like all perfect prospects in life it has been too fair to last. Very well, aunt Erle; if you insist, there can be no question of my routing out from this indolent enjoyment."

"Much you deserve sympathy!" retorted aunt Erle, with as much impatience as she often manifested toward him; "much, indeed, if that is the height of your consideration. Forgive the ruffians for walking off with your valuables after coming within an inch of taking your life. I hope I'm a Christian, but I don't long to equal that stretch of generosity."

"And all because I instead of you was the sufferer."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DOCTOR'S PATIENT.

You would bear up with the most sublime fortitude in a merely individual case."

"Erle," said his aunt, facing about suddenly, the stiff silk crackling with an abrupt movement, an anxious emotion came into her face, "have you remembered that the ring was among the valuables lost? It's unlucky—a bad, bad sign."

"I have remembered it, and I regret it more than all the rest. My mother's ring—the dearest significance it could hold for me. I am not in danger of being troubled by any superstitious fancy attaching; rather, I can afford to defy such."

Miss Erle closed her lips and spoke no remonstrance, but the anxiety was not cleared out of her face. That same afternoon as Ethel sat by him, the book which she had been reading aloud dropped into her lap, the subject came to his mind again. He reclined upon a sofa, in dishabille of purple-brocaded dressing-gown and embroidered slippers, looking none the worse in his pallor and languor and general petted invalidism. He put out his hand and drew hers into it, turning a heavy ring she wore, having the device of a heart wrought in diamonds flaming out from an incrustation of rubies which burned like a sullen glow upon the taper white hand.

"I have lost the mate to it," he said—"the ring with which the Hethervilles have been accustomed to wed their brides. Have you faith in evil omen? They say—that is, tradition says, such a loss foretells the breaking of the betrothal, though where tradition found authority for the same I am at a loss to surmise, since there is no record of either ring having ever been parted from the family possession before this."

"Yours may not be irrecoverably lost," she suggested.

"A happy reminder. It would be quite out of precedent, and a marriage in the family probably be voted no marriage without the Hetherville ring. Failing it, I think I can answer for our independence of old customs, and assert as emblematic a degree of constancy in any new substitute."

The hazel eyes were looking at him with an intent expression, and the slim hand drew away from his clasp. There was a feeling astir in her heart, a half-impulse to confess the misgivings which even now were not wholly at rest, a longing to cast herself upon his generosity and gain the release which would surely be given for the asking. But after all, how much better would she be for breaking this bond which had united them since distant childhood? Would she not be miserable, instead, for bringing such a misery upon him? She respected his firm, manly principles, and liked him so much; he was so unmistakably handsome as he lay there, supporting his head in his white, shapely hand, his hair gleaming a darker shade but almost as intensely golden as her own, and Ethel was no Sphinx among women to be insensible to such masculine beauty. How could she endure to witness her brother's disappointment with the great debt of gratitude she owed him upon her? And, with nothing gained, would she not be miserable in her own right at relinquishing the expectation which had been held constantly in her sight during these six years? It was a morbid impulse, one which her better judgment would repudiate as it had done in calm deliberation once before.

Ah, Ethel, was it the better judgment which had rebelled, or was it an upspringing of that inexorable pride—the same, however, modified and unsuspected under your gentler exterior, that had been the ruling power of Howard Richland's life? Was it more a shrinking from the acknowledgment even to herself of having given unasked the heart which was not hers to give, and to a man who had never spoken one word of love, who had never ventured upon a speech of gallantry, or by any act of his interpreted more than in civil intercourse he would give to any other woman?

"Where had you gone?" he asked, smiling, at her absorbed, perplexed expression, dissipated by a remembrance of his immediate facing of her. "Not on a clairvoyant quest of the missing ring?"

"No, indeed," with a little feminine shiver. "I have a dread of those subtle powers which so far outreach our ordinary understanding. I would rather agree with you in ignoring the old superstitions, if for no better reason than may be found in consulting newer ones. I have a fancy I would rather not be wedded with the Hetherville ring. There, spare me that glance of sad reproach—I know quite well what a coveted honor it has been."

He was alone shortly after that with his thoughts wandering back to the suggestive result their conversation had indirectly touched.

"What reason for deferring the understanding which must be arrived at soon?" he asked himself. "Why not make haste to complete the bliss which has been so long in prospective? To-morrow aunt Erle set aside for my appearance below, but I think I shall anticipate the good old lady's permission by finding my way to the library now and awaiting the return of my brother-in-law in *futuro* close at hand, according to his regular hour. I have Ethel's authority for the treaty; so let it be brief and mutually satisfactory, as it lies in the nature of the pleasant affair to be."

He went out through the corridor where his steps fell noiselessly on the thick pile, down the stairs, and with his hand upon the library door, swung it silently back, then stood as if transfixed upon the threshold—stood gazing silently down at a little figure that curled in one of the great library chairs, her hands crossed upon the arm, her head lying against the back with the small elfin-face fully in view, soft, dark hair clinging about the rather low brow, and the eyes sealed in sleep.

DR. CRAVEN DALLAS lost no time in establishing himself in the old house on the Manchester road. There was no one to dispute the bequest with him and no tedious formalities to be observed in assuming the responsibilities of his new situation. Some might have wondered at the doctor's taste as well as his haste in taking occupancy of the dull, rambling, shadowy place, from which the death-shadow had scarcely lifted, where ghostly, dispiriting shadows lurked in odd corners in the brightest weather. But Dr. Craven Dallas was not affected by morbid sentiments any more than he was superior to the collateral consideration which would have adapted him to worse quarters had any personal advantage demanded it. Perhaps no more fit successor could have taken up old Matthew Gregory's relinquished reign.

Alone as he had kept himself during his life, alone from all kindred pity or sympathy or affection as he had been in his dying hour, so he had been hurried from under the shadow of the roof which had sheltered him for two-score years into an obscure corner of a dark, damp old cemetery, shut in by such forbidding walls, so overhung by the shadow of the old stone church upon the one side, so crowded in by the tall tenement-houses upon the other, that none of heaven's brightness or earth's fairness ever straggled by any chance into that dark inclosure, which was more like a spot accursed than hallowed ground. A few followers there were, drawn by that insatiate craving of morbid curiosity which makes Death—the great leveler of all distinctions—so familiar a discussion with the common classes. Dr. Dallas with a fold of crape surrounding his hat, Mrs. Gerrit with a corresponding badge in the mourning-veil she wore, and the lonely orphan ward, were all in the little knot gathered near the long, narrow grave, who, having any interest with the departed life, might be supposed to experience an emotion at these last observances paid to the body.

The impassive faces of the first two were stolidly undemonstrative in all expression, and the few bitter tears Wilma shed were more in pity for her own utter friendlessness than grief for the hard, harsh man who had repelled every advance she made to him in life, whose cruel assertion, in response to her last appeal, had fallen upon her like a parting curse. That she was not to be left friendless and destitute, that she was to be transplanted to a healthier atmosphere of kindness and care for her welfare, touched her with such unexpected happiness afterward—filled her poor, chilled, starved heart with such a warmth of thankful gratitude, that, for the first time, the shadows which had burdened her young life let through a rift of the sunshine which should be the natural allotment of all young lives.

So her first glimpse of a quiet, deep joy had come to Wilma over that lonely grave in the darkened churchyard.

A wood fire crackled on the hearth of Dr. Dallas's sitting-room, as the evening which closed the first week of November came down. It was cold and clear without. There had been a little rain on the previous night, and patches of ice and slippery glares upon the sidewalks were deceptive pitfalls under feet of unwary pedestrians. The house, set back from the thoroughfare, caught none but the deadened echo of noises from the surrounding streets encroaching fast upon this which had been, not long ago, beyond the extreme outskirts of the city limits. To the south, the dense smoke which perpetually overhangs the twin city could be traced like an immense heavy cloud against the clear night-sky, and the red eyes of the furnaces came out, one by one, as the darkness deepened. This sitting-room, with the cheerful flame sending a ruddy glow over its bare extent, communicated with the chamber where old Matthew Gregory had spent his last breath, just too soon to enforce that prompting which seemed suddenly to have become such a feverish desire. Scarcely changed in detail, it was the doctor's sleeping apartment now, and no ghost of a broken trust haunted him there.

He was smoking his pipe before the fire, his eyes fixed upon it, his thin form seeming even thinner in his dingy loose dressing-gown, his sallow face, with the scant hair giving his forehead an appearance of greater width than the reality, was inscrutable in its repose.

"Domiciled under a roof of my own, thanks to my skillful generalship rather than my very dear friend Gregory's kindness," he soliloquized. "A good addition to my practice, which, though small, is tolerably lucrative." There were some to say that the secret of Dr. Dallas's success was not owing alone to his medical ability, but rather to the knowledge of the nature of skeletons inhabiting certain rich men's closets than his intimate knowledge of practical skeletons strung upon wires, like the one in a curtained niche of this very room, the sight of which had given Mrs. Gerrit, who remained in her capacity of housekeeper in the place, such a fright that she was hours in recovering from it. "I fancy that my legacy is not the single good fortune which comes down to me through Matthew Gregory. A discreet man, but one who was mistaken in supposing himself an impenetrable mystery to other men."

The fire sunk fitfully, and as he stirred himself to poke it vigorously, he lost the sound of the gate creaking on its rusty hinges and of heavy, uneven steps on the paved walk without. A loud knocking at the door, repeated almost before the first echoes died away, bore so unmistakably the sound of an urgent summons, that, hastily lighting a lamp which stood in readiness, he went out with it in his hand to himself give the required admittance.

Two men stood upon the steps; one, the taller, leaning heavily upon the shoulder of the other.

"You are Dr. Dallas?" he asked. "I met with a confounded accident out here by your gate, that has given me a sprain or a wrench of some sort. I suppose I can come in and have the thing attended to. This gentleman, who was so kind as to pick me up from my tumble in the gutter, recommended me here. If you'll kindly give me your arm a little further, sir—so! Curse the awkwardness of this, to say nothing of the inconvenience! Who would have thought that such a two-penny bit of ice could give such a deuce of a twist? Thank you, my man, and that to drink to my chance of speedy dependence upon my own limbs."

The man, who was probably a mechanic from his appearance, would have declined the coin proffered him, but, being pressed, accepted it, and thanking the donor, withdrew. The doctor was already kneeling, making a swift examination of the injured limb, but the keen light eyes, that never let any thing escape them, had seen the golden gleam and heard the clink of coins carried loosely in the other's pockets.

"A dislocated ankle," he said. "It was something of a feat, that of limping in upon it, and I see that the pain is having its revenge. It is badly swollen; the sooner put into place the better. Can you endure the added twinge?"

"Go ahead!" was the brief reply.

The doctor did go ahead, after a glance into the other's face, a trifle pale under the deep bronze of the skin, but with every muscle firm, not a quiver of a nerve anywhere to manifest the acute agony he must have suffered. When the limb was fairly dressed and easily placed, Dr. Dallas stood with his hand upon the chair he had lately occupied, not looking directly at his unceremonious patient, and said:

"You will do very well after that, and you stood it bravely. Will you have a carriage ordered, or may I offer you my own poor hospitality for the night? I can find some one to take any message you may desire to your friends, in that case."

"If you can accommodate me for a day or so, until I'm about again, I will be happy to square accounts with you for the advantage derived. I'll give you no further trouble than that. I've no friends to communicate with—not even acquaintances in the city."

"In that case I'll order preparations made for your stay here. The best at my disposal is plain enough, but we'll endeavor to make you comfortable." He went out to consult with his housekeeper, but returning after a few minutes, resumed his chair.

"You were smoking," said the other, glancing at the half-filled pipe which he had put down hastily and still alight. "Take another pipe in my company, and favor me with an opinion of this brand. Rather fine, I consider it."

He passed a heavy silver tobacco box, and drawing a short meerschaum from his pocket, filled it after the other.

"From the West?" the doctor asked, between his puffs.

"You think so? Quite right! Odd how one carries the flavor of a locality about with him."

"Not so odd while you carry jingling currency. We don't have many 'yellow boys' turned loose about here in these days. Been in the service out there? That inference is clear enough; a military man is recognizable anywhere."

"So it would appear. I was in the frontier service not a great while since. You said something a moment ago of my bearing that little operation without an ado over it, but by the time a man goes through the mill I've been ground in, he isn't apt to flinch at such a trifle. Little enough to come to the fact of the accident, but a devilish inconvenience into which you are thrown for your share."

"Don't speak of it," said the doctor, blandly. In this new patient he was positive he would not find an illiberal debtor. Ethel's reading of this man's character had not been far wrong. A dozen ordinary men might have dislocated their ankles before his gate, and he would not have disturbed his domestic arrangements to have received one of them. But this was not an ordinary man; his first glance had shown him that and that clink of gold and silver coins in his pocket had assured him of as much more as he had cared to know at first. He was a soldierly-looking man, erect, well built, broad-shouldered, and muscular, and with a bronzed, bearded face and curling hair, that had been chestnut but was turning grizzled along with his heavy military mustache and lower whiskers.

"Don't speak of it," the doctor said. "My regret is that I have not better to offer you. Mrs. Gerrit, my housekeeper, will arrange my sleeping-room yonder for your occupancy. I have a medley piece of furniture here," pointing to a nondescript object at the back of the room, "which can be metamorphosed into a sofa or a bed, or a table at pleasure, which will serve my turn as it has done many a time before. The truth is that I have very recently established myself here, and the place remains in almost the state preserved by its late occupant. By the way, you have not favored me with your name."

"An oversight. I am Leigh Bernham, late captain in the 10th cavalry. Do you succeed a brother practitioner here?"

"No; the place was left me by a patient, partly as a reminder of old friendship, partly in return for services rendered. Matthew Gregory seemed as much a fixture as the old house itself, apparently, but he was buried from here a couple of weeks ago. Of course you are not interested in any of this."

Captain Leigh Bernham, late of the 10th, smoking his pipe contemplatively, presented a steady aspect of feature which one who runs might not read, which might baffle those keen bright eyes, under

which he was for the time being placed with more object than they yet had to look him through.

"I am interested in anything," he answered. "Having no interests of my own, I am led to take up those of other people. This Mr. Gregory had no blood-heirs, I am to presume; or is it possible that *rara avis* has been discovered at last, a surviving relative who is not ready to squabble for 'dead men's shoes'?"

"There are no relatives. Did I understand you to say you had left the service, Captain Bernham?"

"Some time since. I sent in my resignation when my brother, more sensible than I had been, though less lucky in one way, died up among the Nevada mines. He had gone in with the California excitement of '54, and never could rid himself of the rather inexplicable fascinations of the rough mining life. I was his heir by law, and he left enough to make the change rather marked between the poor devil of an army captain and a stock-holding nabob of the Far West."

"For all which," thought Dr. Dallas, during the interval of silence which elapsed, "there's something more behind the reserve that says so little of himself. Trust Time and Craven Dallas to bring out the convincing proof of that if nothing else."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DOCTOR'S COFFEE.

"LONELY? Well, no sir; I can't say that it seems so to me. I've lived here for a matter of seventeen years, and now I've grown used to the place, just as I have a sort of fancy that it has grown used to me. I couldn't feel quite at home anywhere else after this, and I think the old house wouldn't be quite the same with me out of it."

"There's no doubt of that, Mrs. Gerrit. Knocking about the world as I have done, I've had little enough experience with home-comforts of any sort; but with the evidence presented before my eyes here, I can understand the advantages of having a competent person thoroughly devoted to one's affairs as domestic manager. You look decidedly comfortable in there now. I wonder if you would object to my coming in for a little sociable chat? If you don't find it lonely I do—confoundedly so!"

Captain Leigh Bernham had limped back through the long dark corridor, which stretched between the two parts of the building—one occupied by Dr. Dallas, and containing, besides the two apartments, which already have been seen, two others, one used as an office, the second fitted with the appliances of a laboratory; the other part, a fac-simile of the first, was divided into kitchen and dining-room, Mrs. Gerrit's own room, and another not now in use.

Some days had passed since his untoward accident, and Captain Bernham was about again, taking the freedom of his host's establishment in a very matter-of-fact fashion, and saying nothing as yet of moving his quarters. Saying no more to Dr. Dallas's concealed disappointment regarding himself his experiences of the past, or his prospect of the future. Some subtle attempts to draw him out had been bluffedly ignored, and the doctor found himself unexpectedly affected by an uncomfortable sense of inferiority, with all his craft and cunning, matched

against the quiet discipline of feature that was proof against all surprises, and the simple open candor fortified at the back by such close reserve. More than once in these days he had repeated that first conviction and half-promise made to himself: "There's more behind his reserve. Trust Time and Craven Dallas to bring out the convincing proof of that, if nothing else." His slow progress made on the way might have shaken the faith of a less shrewd and subtle spirit, but the doctor's was only heightened by his own lack of success. He was out visiting patients now, and Captain Bernham had the whole morning before him to while away.

"Begging your pardon, sir, I'll take it as a great kindness. I overlooked inviting you in through so long habit to the old master's ways. It's a great change since he's gone—a great change—but it's not for me to complain of it since I'm kept on. That chair, sir, you'll find an easy resting-place, with the hassock for your lame foot. Do you find yourself comfortable now?"

"Very comfortable, thank you. Your old master, the late Mr. Gregory, must have been quite strongly attached to you."

"Hardly that; it wasn't his way to be attached to any one. He was never any thing but distant to even them one might think would have won upon him closer. He never interfered in the household arrangement, which was a great thing for a lone man, and one so set in his own opinions. He left me a remembrance in his will, only a small matter, but enough to show that he thought kindly of me."

"Quite the proper thing to be done after seventeen years of faithful service, I should say. My only inclination to quarrel with the late Mr. Gregory is that he did not make it more considerable, no impossible matter since there were no heirs-at-law in the case. A woman's tact in the house is invaluable and you have excellent skill, Mrs. Gerrit. Upon my word you force me to mark the difference between your cozy snuggerly here, and my own and the doctor's speedy bachelor disarrangement over yonder."

He cast an admiring glance about the room, plain enough in all reality, but with those little touches apparent which speak loud as words of a woman's handiwork. A little round stand in a corner with a coarse but snow-white cover holding a wicker-work basket, with a medley of bright worsted contained in it. A vase of dried flowers on the mantel, one or two graceful prints in rustic frames upon the wall, the embroidered cover of the hassock, fine touches which after all were not traceable in any apt degree to that good plain person, Mrs. Gerrit. She followed his glance with some gratified pride beaming in her

face, and something like a sigh agitating the handkerchief crossed upon her ample breast.

"They're not my doing," she explained. "I haven't any faculty that way, for all I like to see the pretty things around. They're all Wilma's work, and they seem more like a part of herself now that she too is gone. See had cunning fingers, and she always would put the little ornaments she made in here. Her own room yonder is nigh about as bare as the rest of the house. Poor thing! poor thing! 'They only make my own loneliness harder,' she used to say. 'I can enjoy them out here with you to share them along with me.' The most affectionate little thing, and for all that the saddest—it makes my heart ache yet, poor dear! The change was a happy one for her, I'm sure."

"Dead?" asked the captain, changing his position before the fire, his tone quiet through sympathy. "Was she your daughter?"

"Oh, dear, no, sir; to both questions. She's Wilma Wilde, Mr. Gregory's ward that was; Dr. Dallas is her guardian now. She left here something like a week before you came. A kind, rich lady who had heard of her took a fancy to befriend her, so Wilma has gone to her house for a time, though I've an idea that Dr. Dallas don't mean to let her go entirely. I've missed her sorely, but it was far away for the child's good. It's not natural for a young creature to take kindly to the sort of life she had here. Mr. Gregory was distant to every one, as I said, but he was more than distant to her. There were those who said, and I sometimes used to think, he knew her to be something besides the little waif he brought up for charity's sake. I've known him to give a crust or a penny to a beggar at his door, but never a kind look or a tender word for her. And she, poor lamb! so patient under it and so gentle, you would think no human heart could withstand her."

"A waif, you say? That is a pitiful lot indeed. I have an idea that bad parents are better than no parents, or what amounts to the same thing, after the rule that certainty of any sort is always preferable to suspense." Captain Bernham kept the ball rolling with that sleight which betrayed no great amount of curiosity on his part, yet encouraged Mrs. Gerrit, who could wax a little voluble at times, to offer a more explicit statement. Matthew Gregory had found a quiet bed in the old corner cemetery; and, released from his influence—from the presence which had served to chill the atmosphere of the whole house—she was blossoming out quite a changed Mrs. Gerrit from the late master's reign. Wilma herself would have had her full heart touched anew could she have heard the housekeeper's tender references; she had been uniformly kind to the little waif, but she was not of a demonstrative nature, and the affectionate outbursts which had not been checked in the bud by her master's example, were kept under effectual control by the express order which had been issued when the child Wilma would surely otherwise have won the expression of them. That order was that no moddley-coddley display of weak sentiment should ever be lavished, beneath his roof, upon that strangeling from all kindred humanity, and it was an order to be enforced, for with it came allusion to the prompt dismissal which would follow any violation of his expressed wishes. Mrs. Gerrit's strict seclusion, too, and separation from kindred sympathy of her own, had turned the milk of human kindness in her breast to curd and whey; sweet curd though it may have been, there was little flavor to it until now, released from the cold, enforced discipline, her natural good-heartedness served it up with spiced cream-and-sugar dressing.

"It's certain enough that she's an orphan, on the one side at least, and if hints to the other might be taken for truth—ah, well! the less said of that the better. It was when I was new in my place—a matter of seventeen years ago almost, something later in the season, for it was bitter cold and storming without, and the Christmas fires were alight, that little Wilma came under this roof." The captain's lips moved after her as though he had repeated an inaudible "seventeen years," but they closed in their accustomed firm line under his heavy mustache, and his quietly interested expression remained quietly interested as she told her story. "There was little enough Christmas cheer inside except for the big blazing woodfires. I was sillier in those days than I have grown to be since. It was the first Christmas I had ever passed outside a house of my own, and a wide mark between it and the last one when Tom Gerrit—as good and thrifty a husband as woman ever was blest with!—sat with me over our plum pudding and roast and great Christmas cake. He was taken down a week after that and lingered on into the summer."

"We had started poor, and the long illness took away what little we had saved ahead, so when the housekeeper's place was like to be vacant here I thought it a bit of rare good luck that I was the one to get it. I had the heart taken out of me by brooding over my sorrow, and through having no soul to say as much as a Merry Christmas. It set in as desolate a night as you'd care to see, two feet of snow on the level, and with the big flakes that had fallen all the day changing at dusk to a sharp sleet, and the wind tearing up through the hollows with the wail in it that turns one's blood cold. I turned timid at the sound of it and at the lonesomeness of the empty house. I went in through the corridor yonder toward Mr. Gregory's with no notion except to get nearer some human presence."

"But, while I stood outside, with a little chink of light through the keyhole and his steady tramp, tramp, going up and down the bare boards inside, there came a dull thud against the outer door and something like a cry. Before I could stir toward it the sitting-room door came open with a crash, and

Mr. Gregory passed so close that we touched without his ever seeing I stood there. I've never supposed anything but that he knew all in a second what had fallen there. He had the door wide and was looking down at what was lying there, stretched across the threshold, before I had brought a thought out of my first start and surprise."

"It was a woman with her head bare, and the long, black hair streaming about her face, all matted with the sleet and torn by the storm. A woman, I said, but she was no more than a girl; I should have taken her for one but for the tiny bundle she held at her breast that stirred and cried while the storm beat down upon them both. That roused me, and the master too. We had them into the light and the warmth, and we did what we could for them with the means we had at hand. It was the tiniest of babies I unwrapped, but a few days old I should have thought, but from the poor mother's having strength to be out it must have been more. She, poor thing! had the color of death in her face and the chill at her heart too strong to recover. She lived through the night and into the day when it came, and died without having a rational moment. Mr. Gregory had her buried from the house in the very churchyard where he lies now, and little Wilma never left here through his time, never up to the very week before you came. Do I weary you, sir, with such a prose?"

"No, you have interested me in this little Wilma, who began life in that pitiable way. Did you say there were proofs of her identity?"

"Not the least, but the woman who had served here before me paid a visit to the house long afterward, and when I told her about it said there wasn't the slightest doubt that the girl-mother had been Mr. Gregory's own daughter. She had come to grief through some handsome, wild young scamp and ran away from home months before. I had never been told that he had a daughter, or I should have known the truth from the first. Her father swore a bitter oath, so they say, that he would never forgive her, and he never did, for a harder face than his as he stood beside her dead body I never saw on mortal man. Did you give your ankle a twist, sir? I was sure you groaned."

"Nothing to speak of, but I begin to feel the need of limbering up again. So this little Wilma—what did you say her name was?—Wilma Wilde has been taken into a rich lady's house? A very benevolent lady, I dare say!"

"A very kind one, Dr. Dallas said. I've no memory for names, and I've forgotten hers, but any change would be better for Wilma. If you'd care to come in here any time again, sir, I'd be glad to make you welcome."

Captain Leigh Bernham limped back through the long corridor into the doctor's sitting-room, which was still empty, with the result of limbering his stiff joint so effectually that he dropped into his accustomed place by the side of the fire, and sat there looking steadfastly down into the coals for the next half-hour, as stirless and expressionless as a life-size cast of bronze.

That evening as he sat in the same place with Dr. Dallas, opposite, smoking with hard puffs until his pipe was in a red glow, he removed it from between his teeth to say abruptly:

"You'll be glad to know, I dare say, that I consider myself so nearly recovered as to warrant a speedy return to my prospects which have been in *status quo* for some time past. Oblige me by making out your bill, not too light, mind you, for all the trouble and expense of which I've been the occasion."

"My dear sir, I really must protest," the doctor began.

"Pray don't, Dr. Dallas. I never listen to protests after I've once made up my mind—a persistency, by the way, which has brought me into many a scrape before to-day. It suited my state of mind at the moment to take up my temporary abode here, and it suits my plans now to follow up my original intent. If you are willing we will dispense with the bill and call it square on that."

He drew a handful of money from his pocket and dropped it altogether into the other's by no means jagged hand.

"A deuce of a sight easier and quite as satisfactory, I hope as the formality of a bill. I'll say goodbye to our pleasant companionship and my own satisfactory sojourn here rather early to-morrow."

"It suits your plans," Dr. Dallas thought, with a contraction of those sharp, catty eyes—"but I'm sorry to admit it, my dear Captain Bernham, such a precipitate movement does *not* suit my inclination in the least. To defer your going or to get some inkling of what those plans of yours may be, are important items of consideration now, and it does not require your assurance that the first might prove no easy matter to accomplish. The fellow sleeps with one eye open or I should have discovered all his effects will tell me before this. Let me hope he may sleep soundly, this last night of his stay." There was a disagreeable gleam in the light orbs, which did not pass unnoticed by Captain Bernham, unobservant as he appeared—a passing gleam which settled the single point of indecision he had carried in his mind.

"I've read that man too thoroughly to trust any thing to him," he thought, "and I'm not quite a fool to give a clew which may be followed into his possession. No, no, Dr. Craven Dallas! much as I might gain by the assistance you could afford me, I will not trouble you by even an appeal for information. Let me help myself to such aid as I can, and trust to less slippery probity if I find myself lacking. What did that side-look mean? Nothing good, as I hope to be judged by a better record than my own merits."

Dr. Dallas put out his hand and reached the bell pull as he met the other's eyes.

"One of the few items of renovation and improvement I have added since taking possession here," he said, with an upward glance at the cord. "Fancy going the distance of a quarter square to communicate with one's own kitchen. I can't tell you how I regret this sudden determination of yours, but, since you declare it incombustible, I must hold myself resigned. I sit up late to-night, and I ordered coffee for us both. Let me flavor yours with brandy in company with my own and wish you undisturbed repose for your last night here!"

Mrs. Gerrit had answered his summons with two coffee-cups on a tray, and, putting it down upon a little stand between them, withdrew again. Dr. Dallas rose, approached a closet at the side and came back with a flask in his hand. He poured a portion into each cup and turned to replace the flask, all done carelessly and with no attempt at shirking the other's observation, but then Captain Bernham was not at the moment glancing that way. In the few seconds the doctor's back was turned, however, he reached swiftly and turned the little tray upon the stand. The doctor came back, and, motioning his guest to help himself, took up the remaining cup, sipping the liquid with slow, apparent zest. Bernham drank his at a single draught and pulled out his pipe again.

"To neutralize the effects of your coffee, doctor. It was deucedly bitter to my taste."

"I drink it so purposely," the doctor answered. "But then, coffee is the only stimulant I allow myself."

"Smoke?" The captain pushed his tobacco-box, always well filled, across to the other. "And by the way, in case you are not astir after your night's vigil, suppose I make my adieux over night."

The doctor's thin lips were just stirred by the slightest sneering smile, and in a moment both men were absorbed in watching the clouds of smoke wreathing hazily about their heads. Unconsciously Dr. Dallas lost sight of another intention he had fixed in his mind, an intention of shifting his observation from the hazy mists to his companion. Presently it was dimly apparent to him that the other had anticipated the intention and was calmly watching him. Then, with no thought of resistance, he seemed to feel a hand searching his pockets and something withdrawn, but all so vague and so separated from any care of his own that, with not even an attempt to shake off his helpless languor, he slid into deep, unbroken sleep.

Had he followed further the facts of those vague forerunning fancies, he would have seen Captain Leigh Bernham leisurely trying his keys in the desk, which had been returned to its old place in the other room—the room in which Matthew Gregory had died. He would have seen him successful after a time, and, searching the interior, bring forth a little box having neither lock nor key, but a spring with which his fingers seemed perfectly familiar. He would have seen the man's head go suddenly down upon the senseless little thing, the bronzed face convulse, the whole strong figure shake and quiver, and have heard a hoarse, unnatural voice in no more than a whisper repeat,

"Dead, dead! Poor little Rose! Poor, poor girl!"

CHAPTER VIII. SHAPES OF AIR.

ERLE HETHERVILLE stood looking down into the small, dark, sleeping face, with a sensation new to all his previous life struggling at his heart—an involuntary recognition of that mournful influence which had preyed upon her life until the stamp of it was so plainly apparent in her face that it was always the first impression to strike an observer—a tender sympathy and a desire to extend protection to that little creature, who looked too childlike and delicate to buffet with any rough fortunes of chance in our rough world. The long dark lashes quivered and the lids went wide, leaving the startled dark eyes looking up at him in turn with an uncertain, doubting expression as if his presence there was scarcely settled in her mind for a fact. His words assured her of it, after the space of a breath.

"I beg your pardon," he said, as her timid eyes fell before his bright, bold, blue ones, and though it was no new experience for Erle Hetherville to have the eyes of women droop before his gaze, the shy grace of this girl made the experience now a delight worthy of his accomplishment. "I would not have intruded had I suspected that the library already had an occupant. I can't hope my appearance has not disturbed you, since I am a witness to the fact, but I can and will make such amends as lie in my power by taking myself out of the way immediately."

"Oh, no, pray don't. I was asleep, I suppose, and not quite sure that I was not dreaming still when I waked suddenly and saw you there. I shall go right away, all the same."

"I will agree to stay only on condition—that I am not the cause of frightening you away. By the way, it would be only according to the law of natural recompense, though a rather queer coincidence, if you really had seen me in your dreams. I have met you in that misty region—let me see, something like three days or so ago."

He was lounging in the open door, with the slight form standing where she had risen first, a smile breaking over the little red mouth.

"It would not have been so strange if I should have seen you in my sleep. I am accustomed to dream of things which have made a recent impression on my mind, and your illness would suffice for that, Mr. Hetherville. Perhaps you dreamed also that I magnetized you back to slumber when you were yielding to wild fancies and going a fair way to bring on the fever which was dreaded? If you will be kind enough to let me pass; Mrs. Richland will be expecting me before this."

"After I thank you for the appreciated kindness. And won't you tell me whom Mrs. Richland will be expecting? If we are dwellers beneath the same roof for a short time may we not be friends as well?"

There was the sweep of a dress at his back, and the maid who shared her services between Ethel and the mistress of the mansion, stood there.

Mrs. Richland had sent in search of Miss Wilma, and would she see to arranging the *epergne* for the dinner-table before she came up-stairs? Mr. Hetherville made way for the little figure, and Miss Wilma disappeared from before his eyes, but leaving a vivid impression of the small, dark, pathetic face, lighted and brightened by its winning smile, lingering in his mind.

He sat down in the same deep chair of purple morocco and solid oak which she had occupied, and turned the leaves of a book with a scarlet mark fluttering between, that lay on the table at his side. He was there still when Mr. Richland made his appearance in the doorway, a few moments later.

"Why, bless my life, Hetherville, this is more of an improvement than I had hoped for. Below, and equal to Owen Meredith, a poet whom I thought men only affected when inspired by the presence of a lady. I wonder if these favorable symptoms are to be charged in any case to Ethel's agency? At any rate, I'm heartily glad of your rapid recovery, my dear fellow."

Not a man of fine tact, the host, but honest to the core, Erle Hetherville found himself struck with a guilty sensation as though he had been tried and found wanting in some deplorable measure by the side of the other's strictly honorable principle. With Mr. Richland's words had come his first recollection of his own mission here, the first reminder of how near he was, in all probability, to setting his seal to his own future destiny, and with the reminder came his first inclination to shirk the issue for a time—to hold to himself yet a little longer his indefinite sense of freedom. He turned his back upon the prompting with the quick recollection that he was not free, that he was bound only less firmly and surely than by the marriage vow, with a sudden, fierce, angry contempt of himself that his devotion to Ethel should have wavered for the first at this supreme moment. He plunged into his subject almost without preface.

"Thanks, Mr. Richland. There's very much owing to Ethel, I assure you. It is with her permission that you find me here, waiting the chance of a few private words with you. You were a kindly approving party to our betrothal of six years ago, and I trust I am correct in assuming that you have not deprecated your favor of me. The extreme limit of the time agreed upon then is now almost reached, and I am here to urge the strict fulfillment of the old plans. I am anxious to make Ethel my wife at as early a day as you may approve and she agree to. I have not accustomed myself to this end for so long a time to urge unceremonious haste now, but I do beg that there may be no unnecessary delay."

"Spoken with the spirit I expected from you," responded Mr. Richland, warmly. "I should have been immeasurably disappointed at hearing any different proposition from you. And Ethel is of the same mind, hey? Well, then, there's no reason, not the slightest, for any delay whatever, except the small time necessary for preparations which must be made. Upon my word, Hetherville, I was never more rejoiced in all my life except once—when I stood upon the same ground you occupy now."

He wrung the young man's hand with all the warmth of his own approval, and that same guilty sensation returned to Erle that he was not more elated over the smooth, fair fortune which had attended his wooing and winning, if wooing and winning it could be called which had brought no exertion of his own into play, which had been attended by none of that painfully blissfully uncertainty that hopes much, and is magnified to a heaven of felicitous rapture when certainty is sweetly and shyly yielded.

"If you don't object," said Mr. Richland, "to leave the management of the whole affair to me, I'll see that those same preparations are not dragged through the entire length some people consider necessary before they settle to even the contemplation of the final ceremony. Ethel is one of the best of girls, but not utterly free from woman's general habit of dallying. I'll give a *carte blanche* for the trousseau, and have it ordered from the largest importing house in New York. After that there'll be no difficulty in naming an early day. I'll be grieved, deeply grieved to part with my dear girl, but, my own late experience to the contrary, I believe in early marriages. If you are to be all in all to each other, give the best part of your lives to your mutual happiness, I say. If you have any objection to my turning such an urgent generalissimo, don't hesitate to make the fact known."

"Not any objection in the world. On the contrary, you must know how great the obligation on my side will be." Yet now, as once before, his words lacked the fire, the hasty inspiration of the enthusiastic suitor who lives in the light of his innamorata's smile.

The result of so much exertion on his part, of mental perplexity more than physical action, was the return of some slightly feverish symptoms that were triumphantly seized upon by Miss Erle as what might have been anticipated from the violation of her rule, as he was taken into unquestioned charge again and impressed with the necessity of resuming the invalided role in his own apartment for the evening. It was by no means so desirable a situation to his thoughts, that night, as it had been when the blue-and-gold of the walls had tangled into cloudy forms and had elfin faces limned in their midst—not so desirable as during the later days of his convalescence, when the world without and the world within that dainty chamber had no links of

connection disagreeably apparent. In fact, the kind of night he passed, sleepless, until the late watches, and restless then with grotesque, distorted dream-forms haunting him, was not at all the kind of night that a happy young lover, just assured of the speedy realization of his dearest hopes, is supposed to pass.

Mrs. Richland broached the subject to Ethel that very night. It was one of their very quiet evenings below stairs. There had been invitations to balls and dinner parties and operas and select receptions to occupy every one of the six nights of the week, but these, with the exception of two or three, had been declined in deference to the invalid beneath their roof. This night with Lotta—that bright, brief star—at the New Opera House as an irresistible magnet of attraction, and two after balls, the Richland mansion escaped even a casual caller during the evening. These domestic evenings, in a household little accustomed to the kind, are commonly such tiresome affairs that no precedent is ever established sufficiently favorable to warrant their frequent repetition. This one was proving no exception, although, as Ethel had asserted once, they were seldom yielded preys to dullness even when thrown upon their own resources, for the members of this little group were knit in habits of companionship and consultation of each other's tastes more than is often found in our so-called first families.

Ethel had taken refuge at the piano and lost herself for a moment in the mazes of "Faust," while her brother sat over a chess-board, matching his skill against his wife's random, absent moves.

"My dear, my dear!" he remonstrated, after one of her least-guarded ventures. "I never knew you to play so badly. Why, you have virtually given the game into my hands, and you generally match me sharply to the end. See how easily I am going to gain the victory."

Mrs. Richland's white jeweled hand, coming up, struck the corner of the board, jumbling the pieces into a mass of mingling colors.

"There, what a pity! I have spoiled your victory; but, as you said, the game was all in your own hands. I am quite willing to yield the inevitable defeat."

"What a pity all women aren't as sensible as you, Gertrude! You are looking wearily; I am afraid you are not as strong as you were—you are not appearing to bear the excitement of the season as well as heretofore."

"I am quite well and quite strong, but a little ennuied, I am afraid. If you will spare my further affliction, I think I shall retire early for once."

"By all means, do. Nothing like a good night's rest to bring you to yourself again, and bless me! the evening has gone rapidly, after all," glancing at his watch, where the hands pointed at a quarter to eleven. "Good-night, my dear! No, don't follow for a moment, Ethel. I presume you are not in ignorance of a petition which was made to me, this afternoon."

"A petition, brother? Not—surely, not already?"—her troubled gaze turned upon him and the faint flush upon her cheek paling would have been evidence of her apprehension to quicker eyes than his kindly ones, but Mr. Richland saw nothing more than a rather sensitive young lady's embarrassment over a delicate love affair.

"Surely and already, and quite the proper action, just as I expected it on Hetherville's part. He was confiding enough to leave the whole affair of arrangement to my dictation, with the stipulation that there should be no delay. What do you say to placing as much confidence in Gertrude? Let her take the whole onerous burden of the trousseau, and when the preparations arrive at a state of general satisfaction, Erle and yourself can settle the important question of naming the day. What might be assumed as undue haste in another case will not be in this, after your long engagement. Hetherville claimed your permission to speak, so of course you are quite willing to agree. A noble fellow, Ethel, and one I shall be proud to claim as my brother-in-law."

"But I did not expect more than simply the understanding yet. I don't want to be rushed into a matter requiring so much careful consideration."

"Rushed, Ethel, after six years' standing choice? What would you women call taking your own time. I wonder? There, there; you quite exhaust my patience with you. If it were not for my respect for Hetherville's feelings, to say nothing of his rights, and if my heart hadn't been set upon your marrying him at this time, I'd be tempted to throw up the sponge at this late date and leave you to maneuver the affair, for the mere curiosity of seeing what turn it would take to the end."

His voice carried a nearer approach to fretfulness in it than Howard Richland's general contentment often expressed. "After all, it might be the surest means of bringing a quick result. Why not throw the matter of a little time on the best side of the scale, I should like to know?"

"The matter of a little time," Ethel echoed, in her mind, drearily. "It is no more than that, indeed, so why should I hesitate for the matter of a little time? And how selfish to grieve Howard, who has been both father and brother to me!"

She passed over the space between and touched her quiet lips to his forehead.

"I am willing to trust everything to you, Howard. Forgive me for having seemed irresolute; you shall not find me so again, with two such steadfast examples in Erle and yourself."

She was gone at that, before he had time to reply a word. She paused at Mrs. Richland's door in passing, but all seemed still and dark there, and she was turning away in the direction of her own chamber, when a thread of light still further on caught her eye. She moved toward it, her light footstep lost on the thick carpeting of the passage. The thread-like

gleam came from the crevice of Wilma's door, but with her silent touch pushing it ajar, it was not Wilma awake there as she had expected to find. Seeing only the back of the tall, graceful form standing with a little shaded night-lamp dispensing a softened glow upon the sleeper's face, Ethel drew back and turned away.

"Like Gertrude," she thought; "always interested in the comfort of others."

She would scarcely have passed the little incident so lightly had she caught a view of the hidden face, the features locked in their usual marble-like repose, but with all the intensity of a strong consuming emotion concentrated in the wide eyes, dwelling with an absorbed fascination on that unconscious head upon the pillow.

"Does my heart lie, or have I gone mad in all reality?" was the wild thought in the soul of this proud, emotionless woman of society, as she stood there, seeming the frozen symbolic statue of that pride which the world both worshiped and decried, mocked by those burning, passionate eyes. The lips of the sleeper parted with a smile, and the woman's hand closed tightly over her heart, as if some sharp agony was tearing there, and she turned away, but with the firm line of her own mouth blanched to a dead whiteness.

CHAPTER IX. THE LIBRARY.

THE Richland library apparently possessed a peculiar fascination for Erle Hetherville after this time. He grew to a habit of dropping in there at odd hours of the day, and before many days had passed was well conversant not so much with the rows upon rows of volumes lining the walls as knowledge of what other members of the household visited that treasury of literature with any regular frequency for.

The symptoms of the relapse which Miss Erle had confidently predicted wore off during the night, and Mr. Erle Hetherville made his appearance in the breakfast-room next morning a little thinner and a little paler for his illness, a handsome, blonde young giant, in morning undress, whose eyes went over the arrangements of the room with a swift, searching glance.

His aunt was there discussing general philanthropy with Mr. Richland, the stiff black silk of her afternoon wear exchanged for a soft, neutral cashmere of the morning. Ethel, who would have looked more like a ghost of herself than the bright, fair belle of two seasons but for the rose-pink of her trailing wrapper which reflected a color to her quiet face, gazed out upon the still, silent atmosphere; and Mrs. Richland looking as she always did, a strikingly statuesque face and form, appeared simultaneously with himself by the opposite doorway. If he had entertained an expectation of seeing the slender little figure and elfin face that had lingered with such strange persistency in his thoughts he was not destined to be gratified.

"You must let us do the honors for you, Miss Erle," said Mrs. Richland during the breakfast hour, "now that you are released from your faithful attendance in the sick-room. I am quite at your service, and I think Mr. Hetherville may be safely trusted to the liberty of the house during the day. No fear of a relapse now, I imagine."

"By all means, aunt Erle, provide yourself with a full complement of tracts and bitter pills, quiet little purses, and big bundles and papers of sugar-plums, and new installments of fresh logic, for those numerous dependents of yours up among the Westmoreland hills. If I'm to give you a safe-conduct back into that benighted region, I stipulate to be fortified with the whole array of introductory articles needed to gain any sort of recognition from those calculating lambs of your village flock."

"You incorrigible Erle! Because all my efforts for the bettered condition, moral and physical, of my poor people are not immediately recognized, it is no proof that the case will always stand so; and, indeed, generally speaking, they are most grateful for my endeavors."

"Big bundles and little purses and sugar-plums," inserted Erle. "Small favors thankfully received, and larger ones in proportion. I must commission you with my mite, all in the way of sugar-plums, however."

"And, meantime, don't have any fear of Hetherville growing melancholy in his seclusion," said Mr. Richland, with a complacent glance across at his sister and very satisfied good-nature beaming in his smooth, florid face. "I shouldn't be surprised, Miss Erle, if you were petitioned to bear a hand in other commissions, shopping excursions and the like, after we persuade you to remain on here until a certain happy event has been consummated. Westmoreland and your poor people must spare you until after the holidays, I'm thinking. Has this hopeful nephew of yours imparted the secret of the understanding arrived at during our interview of yesterday?"

Until after the holidays! Ethel caught her breath with an upward glance, quickly dropped again. So soon, so very soon! Even Erle was surprised almost to expression. He had stipulated for no delay, and had entertained some vague thought of early spring and a voyage across the ocean, with the honeymoon passed in South France and Italy.

"Not told you? Is it possible? Ethel, my dear, no need of that shy reserve. It is all in the family among us here. Gertrude and I have quite agreed in relieving you of all responsibility, so that all you two young people are expected to do is simply to amuse yourselves in any way you like, and avoid becoming too much absorbed in each other. Coming back to you, Miss Erle—we all hold ourselves of second importance—you surely will not contemplate leaving us now?"

But Miss Erle, wavering for a moment between her own delight and her sense of personal duty, decided conscientiously in favor of the latter.

"I could not be of use here," she said, "and I would be lost at advising for a wedding. I am wanted at home, missed I am sure, now; why, I haven't been out of Westmoreland for two consecutive weeks for the last ten years. Just as soon as Erle is fit to travel he shall go back with me. I'll not insist on keeping him very long, my dear, and I'll come down to the wedding with more happiness than I can express." With that she kissed Ethel tenderly, with a smiling assertion that she was the only young lady in the whole circle of her acquaintance quite good enough for her own dear boy. The dear boy sauntered around the table to receive his share of the caresses, and stood with his hand on the back of Ethel's chair, chatting gayly until the little breakfast party broke up, its members dispersing in their own various directions.

It was three hours later in the day, and the carriage containing Mrs. Richland and Miss Erle had rolled away from the door, when, in his restless wandering from place to place, he let himself unceremoniously into the library.

Those well-ordered doors with exemplary hinges were surely a great institution in the mansion. Erle Hetherville was more than ever inclined to bestow a silent benediction upon them as he stood, unseen, looking in at the two occupants of the room.

Ethel lay back in the great chair now, her fair hands holding some scrap of needlework dropped into her lap, her soft, hazel eyes fixed upon her companion. The latter was in a window-seat, with an open book in her hands. She turned a leaf, reading:

"Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null—"

and glanced up with a deprecatory little motion.

"I don't like it," she said, with simple candor.

"And neither do I like it, Wilma. Women are not created so feelingless as the poet would have us think. You may leave 'Maud' and read something else if you like."

But the reading was not immediately resumed. As if his proximity affected her as she had vividly impressed him with her sweet, shy timidity, her unaffected, child-like grace, her trusting, innocent candor and the reflection of the sadness and loneliness which had shadowed her life heretofore, Wilma's fine sense had detected his presence. Ethel, following the direction the dark eyes had taken, saw him standing there.

"Come in," she said. "No, don't stir, Wilma; Mr. Hetherville can accommodate himself on the sofa here without interfering with your light. Miss Wilde, Mr. Hetherville!—you two are strangers, I presume, though you should not be, with almost a fortnight since you have both been inmates of the house. I hope that you understand you are admitted here on sufferance only, Erle; this is our course of regular discipline of late. Wilma reads to me or with me in the mornings, and I play propriety for her when the time comes for her music or language lessons. Then I teach her a little of my wonderful proficiency in drawing—by the way, did you know that I sketch? It's one of my accomplishments taken up since our 'childhood days together.' I'll give you convincing proof of the fact presently. And in return Wilma does wonderful lace embroidery, and picks up all my fallen stitches so unobtrusively that I have been actually deluding myself into the belief of late that I am one of the most exemplary of careful mortals."

Mr. Hetherville, bowing his acknowledgment to the introduction, sunk lazily into the place indicated.

"On sufferance though it may be, I assure you I would suffer any penalty rather than deprive myself willingly of so much unexpected pleasure. Don't let me, I beg of you, interfere with the usual exercise, and, indeed, you quite charm me with the description of that mutually beneficial companionship."

Both were thankful now for that open discussion of the breakfast time, which divested this encounter of the embarrassment each must have felt had it been otherwise.

"I don't mean that you shall interrupt," Ethel averred. "In that case, however, you are entitled to an equal privilege. I dare say you came in here to enjoy a cigar, and I shall certainly insist upon the indulgence."

"With thanks for the permission, then. What an extremely sensible young lady! Did you really chance to know there isn't a more efficient way of silencing any of us masculine bipeds than by according such a liberty? Truth, I assure you. If Miss Wilde will favor us with anything she likes from the poet laureate, I'll be happy to respond in the same way myself presently."

The reading was resumed, and Erle, blowing fantastic wreathing clouds about his head, watched them rise and fall, take form and melt away, while he listened to the clear, vibrant, expressive voice rendering the full sentiment of all that was to be conveyed. Watching the changing face between smiles and with all his own indolent sense of contentment come suddenly back to him.

"It never occurred to me before this to wonder what she may be in the household," he thought. "Miss Wilma of last night, I remember—Wilma Wilde. Odd little name, harmonizing admirably with the odd little creature she seems to be. Self-possessed under all her shy reserve, fine-featured and slender-handed and musical-voiced, Wilma Wilde, whatever she may be, is no less a lady than my own unmistakably high-bred fiancée."

It was the pleasantest of hours that ever flew on incredibly swift wings. Erle redeemed himself of his voluntary promise by relieving her presently; and at last, when Wilma went away to oversee the

arrangement of their lunch, recalled Ethel's laughing reference to her sketches.

"I shall surely pass the keenest of critical judgment," he said, walking across to the little sketch portfolio where it lay upon a neighboring table. "Tremble for the result if you care."

He turned the leaves with amusing comments, and Ethel spared them perhaps half her attention from the work she had taken up again, caring little enough for the really meritorious efforts to bear his light raillery with perfect indifference. His own affectation of ludicrous criticism changed suddenly to an involuntary low whistle as he took up one of the later pages. Glancing up, she saw what he held with a vivid return of the color to her cheeks, a little mirthful smile breaking over her lips. It was the cartoon of a youth, with the faintest trace of a mustache over his mouth, on his knees by the side of a short-skirted, simpering little miss—the very evident burlesque of a first love confession. But the humorous resemblance, the surroundings faithfully executed, came up before him as something different from burlesque; as very well remembered enthusiastic reality in fact, and a flush of annoyance rose to his forehead. No man cares to know that his own earnest feeling, even when changed by the remote distance to a boy's folly, has furnished amusement to any other. The slight annoyance was very quickly passed, however, and he met her eyes with a comical expression.

"I dare say you are right. It was a rather ludicrous affair as seen from our standpoint now," and folding the offending leaf, took calm possession of it. "A warning that I shall not fall in asserting my lawful degree of authority when the proper time comes."

"And be overruled by submission. That is the way it is done, I believe."

So they had passed into an easy recognition of their old familiar terms, and with no further reference to the future in which they were mutually involved, forgot for the time the disquiet which had separately haunted both.

Ethel uttered an exclamation of surprise as she glanced at the little gold watch at her belt, while they were lingering yet over the lunch-table as the bell rung a sharp, unmistakable business summons.

"Your music-teacher, Wilma. How the day has gone! No, Erle, in pity to this child's timidity, I must excuse you from further attendance upon us."

The music-lesson was over, and the excitable little French professor gone again. Wilma was above stairs now in Ethel's company still, and in Ethel's room, her deft fingers looping up Ethel's sea-green dinner-dress with knots of rose-ribbon, when a tremulous sigh escaping her lips drew the other's observation. Ethel was always tenderly considerate, especially so to this heretofore neglected young girl.

"You are not unhappy here, I hope, Wilma?"

Wilma's smile would have been answer enough despite the tears standing in the big, soft dark eyes.

"Unhappy! I am so wonderfully thankfully happy, Miss Ethel, that it seemed so much joy couldn't be intended to last for me. So much kindness from every one in the house, I don't know how I have ever deserved or can repay it."

"Dear child, if ever unassuming worth deserved, yours is well deserving. There's not one of us could afford to lose you now."

Happy, happy change indeed from the loveless, lonely life of so few weeks ago! It was no new thing for Wilma's eyes to be suffused with grateful tears, or for her full heart to swell almost beyond containing her present joy.

There were a number of callers that evening, Lenoir and Crayton among them. The former had been at the house almost daily during Hetherville's first precarious week of illness, and he expressed his pleasure now in warm terms at his recovery, very much speedier than had been even hoped. Crayton, one of those true Bohemians who are at home in any society, who know everybody, and whose immeasurable impudence is counterbalanced by real genius of a certain sort, put himself forward with his sublime unconcern.

"My dear Hetherville, take my congratulation along with the rest. I didn't trouble myself to call when you weren't in a state to appreciate the attention, but I'll promise to make up the omission when you get back to those old jovial bachelor quarters—if you ever do get back, I suppose I ought to add. What a windpipe you must be the lucky possessor of to come out so little the worse from the close embrace it got the other night. I suppose you saw the account of the affair. Our three locals dished it up in as many different ways, and I threw in sensational head-lines by the half-column. What a blessing those head-lines are, by the way! Saves us poor devils of pen-scratchers many a long, close column, and is a deuce more inspiring to the eye. And, by the way, I put forward a hypothesis—not in print out of consideration for Lenoir there. I am quite convinced, since striking it, that my proper sphere in life should have been in the detective corps rather than on the editorial staff!" Mr. Crayton was a little given to enlarging upon his own merits, and magnifying the importance of his own position when outside the office.

"Upon my word, I wish you were in the corps, if that fact would return my missing valuables. Pray how would you trap the slippery rogues, Mr. Crayton?"

"My dear fellow I would quite slip over all slippery rogues. Take the case in abstract now. Two young men are walking home through the streets. One turns off and leaves the other standing under the glare of a street-light. The first kills the echo of his footstep as he goes, is lost in the darkness."

darts around the first corner afterward, down one alley and up another one, and comes out breathless half a square ahead. There's time enough to recover breath, however, and—the remainder can be better imagined than described. Rather a remarkable hypothesis, is it not?"

Erle's eyes opened wide with indignant surprise.

"Remarkable, I should say, Mr. Crayton. I hope you have overlooked the fact that a breath of that sort might affect Mr. Lenoir very unpleasantly. I sincerely hope you have not referred to your hypothesis as a possibility?"

"Outside, certainly not. I have quite too much consideration for Justin as I just now remarked. But *why* not between ourselves?"

"Why, Mr. Crayton, I would as soon suspect any one—you for instance as Lenoir."

"And with the same facts to point the case so you might," responded Crayton, coolly. "Pon honor, with only that much incentive I'd throttle any man in the universe to rid myself of a reported successful rival."

He nodded familiarly toward Lenoir and Ethel, at quite the opposite end of the long room, Lenoir with his elbow on some convenient support, leaning toward her and talking animatedly, Ethel with her face raised, listening intently with a rapt expression—such an expression as he had never been the means of calling there.

"And she caricatures *my* love making," he thought. "She even avoids words apart with *me*. It looks—it certainly does look—" Earle Hetherville's brows contracted ever so slightly. Something more than twenty-four hours previous to this he had wished almost for some disturbance of the too smooth course their love had taken. With what might have been the slightest foreshadowing of a storm ahead, he had a grieved sense of injury astir in an instant. He was immeasurably vexed at himself, and more than immeasurably vexed at Crayton when Lenoir came back to join them a few moments later.

"I've been demonstrating my hypothesis to Hetherville," said the imperturbable reporter—"the same I explained to you as we came down. Oddly enough he turns your advocate on the second."

Lenoir's frank laugh had not a measure of apprehension in it.

"I trust to Mr. Hetherville's better estimation to exonerate me from all suspicion. You carry your absurdities uncomfortably close sometimes, Crayton."

At that Mr. Richland turned about to face the young man.

"What is this I hear of you, Lenoir? That you aren't content grinding out your brains on a daily newspaper, but you must go to grinding them closer over some abstruse work on domestic economy? How do you get along with it?"

"Slowly, I am sorry to say. I am in need of reliable references and illustrative cases. The lack of a really good public library is a blemish upon the fair record of our twin cities."

"Suppose you should try a private library then—mine for instance. I've an idea you may find almost anything there; I had it well filled in by a connoisseur last year. I'll be happy to place it at your free disposal."

CHAPTER X.

ONLY A TOUCH.

"CAN you tell me where Mr. Hetherville is, Cicely? Or if you would find him and ask him to step here for a moment." Miss Erle looked a little flushed and slightly annoyed. There was a clear protest in the quivering ribbons of her light little headdress, an indignant rustle of the stiff black silk, as she smoothed down its folds with a nervously impatient hand. She had gone down the stairs with a letter in her hand, on the look-out for Erle to post it. But Erle was nowhere visible, and in the round she had taken she had a glimpse of another view, which gave the excellent old lady's rather variable temper a dissatisfied turn. The glimpse of a very simple little view at that. Justin Lenoir, who had availed himself of the invitation given by Mr. Richland, and come unceremoniously to the house these mornings, delving deep into the invaluable mine of information the library afforded him, full two hours later than his usual time this day, had surprised Ethel alone in the room.

"I haven't five minutes for my pleasant work here," he said. "I hope to have one uninterrupted evening, this one, and came for a book of statistics I find myself needing. What an unfailing resource you have here!"

"It is my favorite resort of the entire house. You may see evidences of our habit of frequenting it every day."

She glanced around at the table strewn with books and magazines with a little basket of flosses and lace foundation, tiny gold thimble, dainty needle-book and bright steel scissors, on a corner, vases on the mantle and window-brackets where fresh-cut flowers were odorously bright, the soft glow of burning coals behind the burnished bars of the grate, the cosiest of home rooms where every appointment was massive and substantial without an attempt at display or undue ornamentation.

"And this is the first time I have had the happiness of finding you here. I shall certainly curtail my own visits if I am the means of interfering with your occupancy of the room."

"I can assure you to the contrary, in all sincerity. Your early hours insure you privacy. I had just come in, and if there is any variation I am rather before my usual reading hour. You are that early bird here and gone before we idlers are roused to any interest in the day."

He secured the volume for which he had come, but still lingered, talking in that easy, familiar fash-

ion which spanned the distance between them and left him forgetful, in her presence, how vast, how unconquerable it was in all reality. It was probably not wisdom for him to forget. He had had his danger presented to him once and been warned against it; he had scarcely accepted the warning kindly; he had put it away in his mind and covered it with the thought that if there had been a wavering weakness before this, the chance of it even was all done with now. Hers had been the delicate nurturing of a life that had never known a care; his had been a struggle since his earliest recollection—a slow winning of his own way through his own merit. Could his true democratic principle have overridden that disparity there was another consideration to place her beyond the reach of his wildest aspiration, as the bright, calm stars are above the earth. She was betrothed, so rumor said, to one who was her equal in every respect, worthy of her as any man could be, one toward whom he was drawn, too, by the strongest powers of that assimilation which may exist between noble, contrasting natures. Whatever temptation might have come to him, unguarded, would surely fall powerless now, hedged in by the full knowledge of how baseless any hope of his own must be, and by the loyalty of friendship which would never undermine the other's right be it ever so loosely held.

"If there be a weakness in my own mind still, I shall live it down," he said, to himself, with a quiet steeling of his fine features, a resolute light in his dark eyes. "If I cannot conquer myself, what hope is there that I shall conquer the course I have marked? But I shall conquer—both."

And Justin Lenoir absolutely believed that he was in a fair way of doing it. Perhaps he was—who knows? Men of his caliber have an insuperable persistency of purpose, and a strong, fine fiber, a resolute nerve, that will carry them unflinchingly over the sharpest thorns of the way where their sense of honor—is it overstrained?—bids them walk. The possibility had not presented itself to him that the very means he was taking to live down his own weakness might drag her tender steps over the same rough path. There was no egotism mingled with his own justifiable confidence in his own powers. He would as soon have expected fame and success to lie at his feet without an effort of his own, as have expected great works to spring spontaneously from inaction, or for Fortunatus's purse to find its way into his possession, as for Ethel Richland, bound to another, with the inheritance of a pride which had whispered in the world—her world to stand her in good stead of any more substantial inheritance—as soon all that as to suppose she could let her heart waver, unasked and unsought, away from the allegiance which should have been hers.

Oh, conflicting prides and purposes! How they cross each other, run counter and pierce into the sharp agony, and yet are stone-blind to the straight, clear way and mellow harmony into which they might be merged!

It was the view of those two as she saw them through the open door communicating between music-room and library that had so disturbed the equanimity of Miss Erle. Hearing the manly tones she had started in through the former, supposing she had discovered her nephew's whereabouts, but paused short and drew back when Lenoir's more slender, straight figure and dark energetic face met her sight, strong contrast as might be to Erle Hetherville, tall and broad and blonde, easily indolent, bold to audacity, self-confident as a petted darling of society may find apology for being. Miss Erle had sharp, bright eyes of her own, not by any means dimmed that fine wrinkles were laced in a network about them, or that the soft hair shaded not concealed by the tasteful little head-dress of ribbons and lace was snow-white and thinner than its once luxurious growth.

"He's just the kind of man to make mischief, if mischief can be made between them. A meddler or a busybody never could, but if any man could rival Erle it would be one of that sort. There's no probability of it, thank goodness! I've been nervous since the ring was lost, and I seem to see danger where of course there is none. Such a little time till the wedding shall be over, it is the height of folly to imagine that anything *could* intervene. I believe that I am glad, after all, of my conclusion to yield to their urging and remain till the wedding is over. I wouldn't be easy in my mind away from here now."

Miss Erle might have gone even further and doubted if she would be easy in her mind there with that slightly superstitious misgiving assailing her, and her clear eyes seeing what had escaped all the rest, how wonderfully alike in temperament were her nephew and his betrothed, and recognizing, though unwillingly, that contrasting rather than similar natures and dispositions have greatest depth of lasting fascination for each other. She went slowly back to her own room, and finding the maid there, busy over the arrangement of those soft laces which were so inseparable from the stiff black silk and its wearer, put her question and made her request in one breath.

"Mr. Hetherville, ma'am? He is not in yet, I believe. He went something less than an hour ago with Miss Wilma to the florist's. Miss Wilma has wonderful taste, and Mrs. Richland trusts her with all the floral decorations. She'll take just a handful of brown-looking leaves, and some bunches of grapes, and apricots or peaches or oranges, and make an *epergne* look as though the fairies had been at work on it. They've gone now to select flowers for the dinner-party."

"With Miss Wilma! It appears to me that my nephew finds occasion to be engaged with Miss Wilma quite frequently nowadays." Miss Erle's continued annoyance led her into that indiscretion

which at any other time she would have been loudest to condemn, encouraging the light gossip of a hireling. It was very kindly gossip as compared to the usual order of servants' observations, but not of a sort calculated to act as balm to Miss Erle's spirit of apprehension.

"Oh, dear, yes! Mr. Hetherville seems very fond of Miss Wilma, and no wonder; everybody is fond of her. You have seen how they have taken to making quite one of the family of her. It wasn't so for the first fortnight after she came. I think Mrs. Richland supposed that the master might object, for she made much of her in her quiet way even then. But, bless you, ma'am, he no sooner takes to noticing her a little, and she falls into the way of going down mornings before the rest and reading the paper to him, and having his slippers ready of evenings, than he says to the mistress—'Why don't you have your little protegee come down among us, sometimes? Poor child! she doesn't look to have been so indulged before this, but she might be able to bear some mark of consideration from all of us.' Miss Ethel seemed to fall in love with her at first sight, and it's more shame I say to any one that isn't taken with her gentle ways."

Miss Erle closed her lips grimly. She had not been amiss in kindness to the girl herself before this, had "been taken," as Cicely expressed it, by the gentle, winning manner which charmed all, but it did not at all accord with her present frame of mind that there should be no exception to the rule of a universal proclamation of Wilma's praises. She did not at all advocate the theory of love at sight, and rather than find any fault with her prospective niece-at-law was quite prepared to shift the burden of her present uneasiness upon Wilma's shoulders.

"Was it your letter you were wanting mailed, ma'am?" Cicely asked, folding away the last of the laces. "I can ask Wilma Thompson to put it in the box if you wish."

"I'll not trouble William Thompson," Miss Erle answered. "I have changed my mind regarding the letter. When Mr. Hetherville *does* come in, please let him know I should like to see him here."

Miss Erle's mind had evidently undergone a decided change. She sat after the maid left her, looking forward into the fire, a troubled contraction in her forehead, her slim, wrinkled fingers tearing strip by strip through letter and envelope, dropping them bit by bit upon the grate. She dropped the last fragment presently as, after a warning tap, Erle let himself into the room.

"Well, my dear aunt! Have I been neglecting my own old lady that she greets me with such a solemn visage?"

He drew a chair forward and dropped into it, throwing his head back with a smile and an affectionate glance of his bright blue eyes.

"When will you be ready to go back with me to Westmoreland, Erle?" she asked, abruptly, scarcely meeting his glance. "I've waited away much longer than I should."

"To Westmoreland? I thought you had given up—that you had concluded to accept the Richlands' invitation and remain here until after the holidays? I should have tried my persuasive powers before this had I not considered the matter settled."

"I've quite made up my mind that I must return home without any further delay. It was reprehensible on my part to hesitate at all. If it would suit you to-morrow, I will order my packing done at once."

"But to-morrow is quite out of the question," asserted Erle, knitting his brows, and looking his perplexity full into the old lady's face. "I'm promised for the ball to-night, my first night out, and to-morrow there's the dinner given here—you can't rush away at the very eleventh hour before that. What has put you in this impatience so suddenly, aunt Erle?"

Miss Erle had no intention of explaining to him precisely what.

"Speak of a woman's perverse spirit," she thought, "and then compare it with a young man of that sort; the first shrinks into absolute insignificance. Give him a hint that I disapprove of the intimacy he is building with Wilma Wilde, and he would immediately conjure up the idea of injustice done to her and set himself to comforting her with added manifestations of his own interest! No, it would never do to give him a hint, any more than it will do to leave him here to pick a misunderstanding with Ethel, or to run the risk of his taking any warmer liking for Wilma. I think I can count on keeping him in Westmoreland for a fortnight, and when he returns he'll take up his old quarters again of course. And of course again he'll devote himself to his *fiancée* in his visits here, and with the holidays so near, and Mr. Richland to press the time of the wedding, it will all be brought through according to the programme."

So Miss Erle pleaded imperative duty as the cause of her recall, and no persuasions could shake her determination of turning her face homeward immediately. She consented, after a little hesitancy, to remain for the dinner party, and the time for their departure was fixed for the morning following.

"What sort of a crotchet has aunt Erle taken up?" mused Erle, in his own private disappointment. "Something, though she is so close over it. So I am not to escape Westmoreland and the villagers, after all? and I am to miss the German translations and the morning readings and the afternoon attendance, from this time out! How deucedly dreary the bachelor lodging will seem, after this!" and, sad to indite Mr. Hetherville forgot to insert a clause there felicitating himself upon the change from bachelorhood soon to take place.

Returning from the ball, that night, in those late or early hours verging upon the dawn, Mrs. Rich-

land found Wilma waiting for her before the bright fire in her dressing-room.

"My child, you?" she said, with an accent of reproval. "You force me to give orders that this offense shall not be repeated. I can not permit you to lose rest—you whose days are given to the comfort of all of us. This is Cicely's duty, not yours."

"But Cicely has Miss Ethel to wait upon, and indeed—I would rather wait up for you than not. You are so very, very kind, and I have so few ways of thanking you, of showing how grateful I am."

Mrs. Richland, with the red glow of the fire shimmering over her rich party dress, looking down into the wistful, tender face, with eyes which might have been looking away through the mists of long years, so absent and rapt were they, put out her hand and touched the girl's hair gently.

Wilma shivered. That touch, so quiet as to be almost imperceptible, had sent a painfully startling thrill to electrify her veins—a thrill so intensely vibrating, she could not have told whether it was most terror or delight, except that a chilling weight at her heart seemed to point at the first.

The absent look melted out of the lady's eyes. She sat down before her dressing-table and began slowly unclasping the jewels at her white, stately throat.

"Go to bed at once, Wilma," she said, quietly. "You may call at Miss Richland's door, and ask Cicely to come to me when she is done there."

"Oh, dear, dear Mrs. Richland, I trust that you are not offended with me!" cried Wilma, all in a quiver of sorrow and remorse. "Indeed, I could not help it; I would not have angered you for the world. Oh, what have I done?"

"Dear child, you have done nothing except to express your own grateful little heart. But you are not here to take my maid's duties into your busy hands. I must watch that they are not overburdened. Kiss me if you like, and good-night, Wilma."

Wilma kissed the cold white cheek turned to her and went away, only half comforted. In her dreams, that night, the same painful thrill of terror came back upon her, and she woke suddenly in the struggling dawn, with old Matthew Gregory's last words to her sounding again in her ears.

"You were cursed before you ever saw the light. Yours is a dead life; if you ever pray for any thing, pray that you may never be the cause of a living death."

CHAPTER XI

THE DOCTOR'S GUEST.

DR. CRAVEN DALLAS opened his heavy eyes, and after a moment of struggling recollection, roused up and shook off the torpor which weighed upon him. Daylight was beaming dully in at the uncurtained windows. The fire was out, and the room in its disordered state looked cheerless and barely grim even to his accustomed eyes. The little stand containing the tray with the two empty coffee cups upon it remained as left on the previous night, and Dr. Dallas himself had an uncomfortable sensation of coldness and numbness, and stiffness, after passing eight hours in that dead sleep which is due to the influence of a powerful narcotic, in his clothes, and in his chair.

"Great Heavens!" he gasped, as the full truth broke upon him. "How is it possible that I made such a mistake?" He understood better when he had shaken himself from his cramped position, and crossed silently as might be to the doorway of the other room. It was vacant, and the bed had not been slept in, as he saw at a glance. His own keys, which had been in his pocket on the previous night, lay upon an inner table. Of his late patient, no single trace remained. Dr. Dallas might have fancied that the entire occurrence had been a dream, the accident of a week before, Captain Leigh Bernham's sojourn beneath his roof, the defeated practice which he had laid for last night's experience, all vague and confused, except the handful of gold and silver coin with which the captain had paid him.

"Truly, a go!" said Dr. Dallas in that ill-temper which is more dangerous than all other ill-temper, simple, intense quietness. "Verily, a guy to have been so readily outwitted. Well, well, Captain Leigh Bernham, all may not yet be over between you and I."

And meantime he had taken up his keys and unlocked the desk, and cast one comprehensive glance over its contents. A silent breath of relief passed his lips. Nothing had been disturbed. Numerous packages, sealed and labeled, rolls of manuscript crossed with faded tape, boxes of receipts and canceled notes of hand, all remained there as methodical, morbidly eccentric Matthew Gregory had left them. A single glance assured him of that. Then he took up the little spring-closed casket, and with a quickness which evinced that he had mastered the secret commanding it before this, threw back the lid. His sallow thin face in its common aspect was stolidly inexpressive, the shifting light eyes guarded against any betrayal of himself, and now only a blank dropped down upon the one and a narrowing beam coming beneath the lids of the other manifested any emotion of rage or disappointment he may have felt. The little box was empty except for a couple of bright gold pieces upon its bottom. He took them up shifting them from one palm to the other, and regarding them curiously.

"Very conscientious of Captain Leigh Bernham," he mused. "Rather overstrained conscientiousness if he had sufficient interest in the contents of this little box to claim the ownership. But for all that a couple of gold eagles will not repay me for the loss: no, nor a handful, nor all you can of your own right bring forward, perhaps, Captain Leigh Bernham."

The restless eye lit suddenly upon a little object which had been concealed within the shadow of the desk. He had it in his fingers in a moment, a miniature case he already knew which had probably been dropped there from among the contents of the box and afterward forgotten.

"Very kind of him to have left me this," he murmured, springing it open in his hands. And the resemblance is there just as I see it stronger every time. I have made no mistake. I am surely on the track which leads straight to the end. My good friend Gregory scarcely meant to put so much proof into my hands, that is evident. And how much more than a fool am I to let it slip away from me again. And I have one more to fight now before the game is mine—one who will be no mean adversary at that."

Dr. Dallas replaced the miniature and stood looking down into the open desk, his face with its prominent features and scant sandy hair, short and straight, a study of concentrated quietude. The little case had a fascination for him, and he opened it again after a time, studying the boyish face represented there, smooth and fine featured as a girl's, dark, defiant, laughing eyes as pictured there, and a smiling mouth drooping a little at the corners—a face in which Dr. Dallas, studying it closely, traced line by line the resemblance he had marked before—a resemblance to his ward, Wilma Wilde.

"Upon my soul, I gain a greater sense of the importance of the kindly service that my good friend Matthew Gregory rendered me, with every day that passes," he thought as he shut away the pictured face again and looked the little desk. "And this reminds me it is quite time I pay some attention to my little *protégé*; I've neglected her with the later charge on hand, I'm afraid. And she has not seemed fond of me, which is a pity, a very great pity, considering the advantage her liking might be. I'll put in an appearance soon as the fashionable morning, which would have been old Matthew Gregory's afternoon, comes around. Think of assimilating Matthew Gregory with any element of our fashionable world—ha, ha!"

Whatever Dr. Dallas's idea in connecting the two—the old man six feet under ground in that damp, dark, overcrowded churchyard, and the bright, gay, giddy whirl of the fashionable world, he enjoyed his own whim of linking them with apparent relish.

He remained good as his word and was ushered into the drawing-room of the Richland mansion during the day. He sent up his card to Mrs. Richland with a verbal request for an interview with his ward.

"You had better go down at once, my dear," said Mrs. Richland, putting out her hand for the book which Wilma had been reading aloud. The latter went slowly; a little of the old shadow came back upon her; the association of her new guardian in her mind was like the chill of the old place brought close to her. He had not gone amiss in his supposition that Wilma was not very fond of him. She dreaded and disliked him nearly as her confiding, affectionate nature permitted her to dread and dislike any one. It had been a bitter grief to her gentle heart that Matthew Gregory, harsh, cruel, and cold, had never given her one glance or word of encouragement, never relaxed one line of his severity; but harsh and cruel, and cold, she could cherish his memory with less of a thrilling terror than she could meet the smooth smile of Dr. Dallas, the cold, clammy, lingering touch of his hand. There was that in his nature from which her fine sensibilities shrunk, that in his sharp, shifting gray eyes that impelled her always with the desire to hide away from his sight. She went into his presence now with her inward reluctance concealed under her quiet manner, reserved in spite of herself; went with a resolution to conquer such unreasoning aversion, and felt it strengthen instead under his profuse greeting.

"And how much improved the dear little girl is looking," he said, after she had taken the seat he had placed for her. "Wonderfully improved. Getting more color and growing rounder, and looking happier. Upon my word, growing handsomer than I ever anticipated, and my expectations in that regard were never very moderate. And you are happy here, Wilma—quite happy?"

"I am very happy, and very grateful indeed, sir."

"So, so; happy and grateful. And they are all kind to you? Mrs. Richland now I dare say is very kind?"

"They are all very kind, Mr. and Mrs. Richland and Miss Ethel—all."

"You wouldn't like to go back to the old house, I presume? And you can't imagine how much we miss you there, and how Mrs. Gerrit keeps such reminders of you before our eyes that it seems you must come gliding in as I've seen you half a hundred times."

She glanced up in a startled way but did not speak. He was her guardian still, she was thinking. He had the right to remove her from all this brightness and warmth and sympathy, which had been such nourishing elements to the chilled, starved life she had brought here. Would he do so? Had her joy indeed been too perfect to be lasting?

"Yes, you must be very happy," he continued, his keen, shifting eyes keeping their almost constant watch upon her face, yet comprehending as well all the perfect details of the room. "And it's natural you should be grateful for the kindness which has given you a place in such a handsome house as this."

"It is the place they have so generously given me in their affections for which I am most grateful, Dr. Dallas."

"Ah, of course! And if some one should give you a permanent place in such a house, and a permanent hold upon such affections, you would take the kindness thankfully. If some one loved you so very

dearly that he would consult your welfare before his own present wishes, and if he would push your interests as though they were his own, and if he should discover something which should add very greatly to those same interests, you would be happy and thankful and loving in return, would you not? Yes, I am sure of it."

The same chill which his presence carried struck her through the medium of his voice now.

"I am very grateful, Dr. Dallas," she said, quietly, "if it is any inconvenience to you in permitting me to remain here."

"It is a sacrifice, my dear, a great sacrifice, but only of my selfish desires. And what was it I said of your right a moment ago? Oh, yes; what a remarkable and fortunate change it would be, if some one should discover that you really have the right to a place in such a stately house as this, to a natural degree of kindred affection from such considerate, gentle hearts as you have found here. A great change, would it not be?"

Wilma, puzzled at his strange manner, under the fire of those light, restless, insincere eyes, had a little part of her wonder dissolve as it came to her suddenly that he was talking to but not at her.

"Wilma has found her right to such a place, Dr. Dallas," said Mrs. Richland's low, clear, sweet tones, as she came forward. "She has won it very fairly by her own irresistible method."

The doctor's light orbs turned in apparent surprise to meet the lady's dark steady ones, and the doctor's smooth tones insinuated his gratification at the affectionate reception his ward had found in the household; but, presently, the doctor drifted out of the light commonplaces with which he kept the conversation going for a few moments, in spite of stereotyped monosyllabic replies he received, and he bowed himself out, away from those steady dark eyes which were proof against any surprise to be reflected there.

He went down the steps and a pace or two forward, then turned and crossed over to where a young man was loitering.

"Good-day to you, Mr. Crayton. I was sure I recognized something familiar about you. And how goes the business of the reporters' world, these days?"

"Slow enough, Doctor. Got a patient over there, eh?"

"Not at all. Merely the matter of a friendly call. You have the same privilege, I suppose."

"Precisely the same, I suppose," retorted Crayton, dryly. "I fancy you and I receive about the same degree of toleration, doctor. We have all the check and they all the endurance of it. Going my way?"

"If this is your way. Refined and pleasant lady, Mrs. Richland. Easy to detect the difference between high-bred culture and elevated snobishness."

"I dare say. I don't pretend to discriminate."

"I should have given you credit for great penetration. By the way, Mrs. Richland, *ne*—whom? Can you tell me? I've been impressed with something like a family resemblance since I had the pleasure of meeting her first, but can't succeed in getting it placed."

"You've got hold of an impression, then, that no one else has ever succeeded in tackling. The truth is she comes of no family, I believe. A case of pure love; the pride and the wealth on our gentleman's side, the beauty and inherent grace upon the lady's. He married her abroad, or married her here and took her abroad, some say. It's all-sufficient that she's Mrs. Richland, and the *nee* Nobody is quietly buried in our upper circles."

"And what it is to be conversant with the history of the same. Sorry to leave you so soon, but business before pleasure, you know."

"What object has old Bitter-Herbs in trying to pump me, I wonder?" mused Crayton, lounging on alone. "Pumping, surely as I'm an adept at the process. Hope he's got his trouble's worth out of my particular good-nature, this morning."

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRIGHT TOUCH OF PAIR.

A VERY old family in fact, my dear; two very old families I might say. The Erles have been known in Westminster since its first settlement, and the Hethervilles have ranked with the first families of Maryland for a couple of centuries. This is the last representative, and my dear boy is well worthy of his name—the last of the Hethervilles and the last of the Erles, excepting me. I think I never should have survived the blow had he disappointed me in his choice of a wife. He is too well aware, however, of what degree of consideration is due to the family dignity, as well as the fitness of the choice he has made. I defy any one to find two more equally matched—two more delightfully mated, when it comes to that. Don't you think so, Wilma?"

Wilma's dusky little head was bent low over her embroidery, and the hands manipulating the snowy flosses were a trifle unsteady in their swift movement. Miss Erle sat back in her chair, her hands idly folded in her lap, her face placid under her soft gray hair, the black silk at its last degree of stiffness, the delicate laces especially fine and soft, looking the picture of that refined old aristocracy of which she was an unyielding advocate.

"What, Miss Erle? I didn't even know that Mr. Hetherville was—did you say he is engaged? I didn't quite catch your meaning, I believe."

"Not know? It is—absolutely incredible. But ah! I don't want a little more; you are in all these matters. But I'll tell you I haven't observed it from their almost silent manner, and from the few words dropped in the lower hall. That is all I know. I don't think I'll tell you their names, but I'll tell you I still more at your first notice of them, I imagine."

"I am not in the habit of talking to the servants,

If that is what you mean, Miss Erle. I think Mrs. Richland would not approve of it."

"My dear, no well-bred person would approve of it." Miss Erle said it with as much gracious condescension and as utter assurance as though she had never yielded to any dereliction from the rule which well-bred people should follow. Indeed, it is doubtful if she had ever taken the conviction of the fact home to herself. "And you do not know how near there is a wedding upon the tapis here, in this very house; not know that my nephew has been engaged to Miss Richland for six years past! A romantic little affair in the way of two children falling in love at first sight, and of the attachment remaining and strengthening and being happily sanctioned on both sides, and now so near to a final fulfillment. It is not often that so happy a combination of circumstances exists throughout, and not often that a marriage so perfect on both sides is consummated at all. Hetherlands has always been celebrated for its lovely mistresses, and the new one who will take possession there, before long, will carry the palm away from all her predecessors. I have thought, of late, how fortunate it is that you are here, Wilma, to fill, in a measure, Ethel's place. It would appear a drearily lonely house, I haven't a doubt, to Mr. and Mrs. Richland, with her gone, but your presence will lighten the trial to them."

"I am glad to know that you think so," Wilma answered softly. "I do wish to deserve their great kindness to me."

"Your sentiments do you great credit, my dear. Indeed, I am quite sure that your correct principle would not permit you to overlook any duty to those who are so deservedly attached to you. If I were not sure that your proper place is here, I should be happy to take you away as my own companion. I begin to feel the need of young companionship; it imparts the vitality we older people lack. You are so useful and tender-hearted, just the person to take an interest in my poor people, and to gain their affections. I suppose, though, it is quite out of the question to suggest it, even after the wedding is over; but perhaps, when Mrs. Richland makes her arrangements for the summer, I might hope to beg you for a little time. That is, if you don't object to Westmoreland and my quiet house."

"Thank you, Miss Erle. I would not object to either, but I hope Mrs. Richland may wish me to main with her."

"And there's hardly a doubt of it. I suppose if there were to be any change, Ethel herself would be petitioning for you. Constancy is such a rare element in our young people nowadays that it is almost miraculous such a long engagement should have existed without even a lover's quarrel to mar it. The more extraordinary that both are so popular in society. There's an old saying that we always return to our first love, but Erle and Ethel never left theirs. Young men are so inclined to trifle, often, I'm afraid, with unsophisticated little hearts that believe in them too fully, and young ladies take to flirtation so naturally, and coquetry, that we who are interested have all reason to rejoice over my dear boy and the lovely girl of his choice having preserved the first freshness of their hearts for each other. How industrious you are, Wilma, and what wonderful work you do! Mrs. Richland was remarking only this morning what an aptitude you possess for delicate needlework."

With the sharp, bright eyes of the old lady upon her, Wilma controlled the quiver which agitated her fingers, and bent the sensitive face closer over her work. But when Miss Erle had gone after a few words more, the white web went down and the face was hidden in the agitated hands.

"Oh, cruel, cruel, to have never told me," whispered the trembling lips behind their shelter. "But they never supposed I could be so foolish—they never suspected I might so forget my place! They are all so kind, and it was only kindness from him. It is, as Miss Erle says—they are perfectly matched—and I shall be happy in seeing their happiness. But, oh, Wilma—Wilma Wilde!" and that little cry of her torn heart was like her old pity of herself which used to arise in her old, clouded, loveless days.

"Wilma, come here a moment, my dear." She had conquered herself, put away her pain in remembering what a happy change had come into her life through the generous efforts of this pleasant household. She had folded away her embroidery and bathed her face, and started in the direction of the music-room with an hour of practice in her mind, when Ethel called her from the open door of her room.

"I want you to try your dress, Wilma. You are to make one of our dinner-party to-day, my dear, and I have made up my mind that you shall appear in something besides your usual blacks. I have had Cicely altering one of my muslins, and I think she has got it to about the proper dimensions."

"But, oh, Miss Ethel—" "If it was mourning for any relative I would not insist. Although you have said so little, I am sure your late guardian could not have cared for you as we do now, so of course it is your duty to make yourself bright for us. You are always that in spirit, and we will make the dress harmonize for once."

"It was not that. But to go down when stranger guests are here, if you please I would rather not."

"It will be a new experience, and one with which you must familiarize yourself. Howard quite considers himself in the light of your guardian, if only a nominal one, and the *protégé* of Banker Richland must be supplied with suitable advantages, a sight of the people with whom she will mingle some day, as well as music and languages and other accomplishments. And this is to be but a quiet party, after all, nothing to frighten our demure little mousie. It is right in laying out the muslin, Wilma. It is making you look like a different mortal. See!"

Wilma looked and saw. A slight little figure with rounded outlines, a sweet, wistful face and deep, large eyes, and soft, dark hair curling back from the temples about the slender neck—the misty, snowy muslin bringing out the clear dark tints of complexion, and a scarlet ribbon drawn through the loose hair giving a touch of brightness to the pretty picture.

A lovely picture Erle Hetherville thought as his admiring eyes rested upon her that evening. A quiet dinner-party Ethel had said, and it was such in reality. But a half-dozen guests outside the present household, and two of these Wilma had already seen—Lenoir and Crayton. The reporter was there by the mere good luck which usually characterized his admission to such parties. A chance meeting with the banker in the street, and an apparently chance reference to Lenoir had brought an invitation similar to one which had been already extended to the young journalist. The party was completed by a couple of middle-aged savans, a young artist whose brush had won him some fame and much favor since he belonged to the *dilettanti* who have not the leaden weight of poverty to clog their aspiring wings, and a threadbare, nervous little man who seemed out of place there until later when they were assembled in the drawing-room and he was called to a place at the piano, when his thin fingers drew all the magic of rare music from the keys.

Wilma was listening to it breathlessly. She had been a silent little form all the evening, charming one of those elderly savans by her gentle and retiring manner, calling some enthusiasm into the glance of the artist, though the man was never enthusiastic. She had drawn back into a niche, almost concealed by a marble Minerva. Her last glance at the little groups scattered about the room had shown her Ethel seeming a very magnet of attraction with the young artist at her side, Clayton lounging very near, and Hetherville leaning upon the back of Miss Erle's chair, turning his attention where his laughing glance rested at the moment upon his fair betrothed.

"So beautiful and so good, how he must love her," Wilma thought, and if the wistful light in those dark eyes deepened it was with no *selfish* envy of the more fortunate lot. She had drawn back and resolutely abstracted herself for any thought which might cloud the bright, affectionate spirit that had won upon all their hearts. Then the music claimed her attention; that perfect melody which to her with that unacknowledged sadness was an exquisite pain. A crash as it slid into another measure, a long sigh trembling over her lips, and the spell was broken for Wilma.

"Decidedly fine, was it not? Monsieur Vacquot would do well to confine his fingers exclusively to that style of note-drawing. It seems almost without exception that great genius must be accompanied by little or no worldly wisdom."

It was Hetherville looking down upon her, his punctilious broadcloth in close conjunction with Minerva's fair, undraped shoulder.

"Is that the reason he looks so troubled—so—"

"So shabbily presentable, so much struggle of broken down gentility against open poverty, of so much talent applied in no better way than to gain himself admittance to some notable house on an occasion of this sort? That is it! Monsieur Vacquot has skimmed through life on a very slender little pittance of an annuity and a very stubborn allowance of an inherited pride. He has gone into debt, and begged of all his friends—literally accepted charity—and denied himself the best comforts of life with that magic at his finger-ends, which ought to coin his notes into gold, or what is the same thing in our day of paper currency. That *tete-a-tete* was never intended for one person, Miss Wilma. If you will permit!" He did not wait for permission, but dropped into the unoccupied seat at her side with the *bonhomie* which made even his audacity attractive. Wilma's heart gave a fierce throb and beat faster, with all her resolution to control it at a strain.

"Are you going to make me retract my good opinion of your character, Wilma? I thought you were the soul of scrupulous honor, and yet you quite ignored the understanding which should have concluded *Aurora Leigh* this morning."

"I was busy," Wilma answered. So she had been, dear child, conquering what had seemed to be such a sore breach of discretion, such weak, ungrateful folly to herself.

"Wilma, you willfully avoided me to-day. You are avoiding me now, at this very moment, by finding more interest in the pattern of the carpet and the blank of Minerva's pedestal than in me. What fault have you found in me that requires such punishment?"

"It is not my place to find fault with you, Mr. Hetherville. And if you please, Mrs. Richland will be wondering where I have gone."

"If it be as I please, Mrs. Richland shall not know for a moment or two. Are you aware that I am to make my adieux to all here to-night? Will you miss me, Wilma? We shall never be again quite what we have been heretofore."

She knew what that allusion must mean, and it gave her nerve to say what she had pondered since he sat there, what might make her own way clearer and easier for her.

"It cannot fail to be a very happy change to you," she said, lifting the soft, dark eyes to meet his. "I did not know, until Miss Erle told me this morning, how soon Miss Ethel is to be lost to the rest."

"Miss Erle has been telling you! And what more may Miss Erle have taken occasion to say?" There was the gathering of a frown in the broad, smooth forehead, the inflection of impatience in his voice.

"Only that the engagement has been of such long

standing—six years, I think—and that it was in every way such a desirable match, and how rejoiced every one had been over it."

"And so aunt Erle could not leave me quite unbiased! Wilma, Wilma! can you tell me there is one who is *not* rejoiced at that prospect—one whose single word will give me resolution to cut the whole mesh of long years' weaving and stand fair and true in my own sight?"

A startled light was coming into her eyes, held by the power of fascination by those bold blue ones, into which a strong passion-flame had suddenly come. The tall, bright head drooped close above her, the rippling golden beard swept her own hair, her hands were caught in the pressure of his white, firm palms, and his low, intense voice was lost, under cover of the music which filled the room, to all ears but hers.

"Wilma, Wilma! I love you, you, you only. Of all women in the world you only shall ever be my wife. Oh, my darling! hear me and help me. The promise of two foolish children, repented of on both sides long before this, shall never stand between you and me."

The music died but swelled again. Wilma's heart seemed to be dying with it, so faint and dizzy she grew.

"I love you, Wilma, as I never loved Ethel in those wildest, foolish, youthful days—as I never could have loved her had the whole earth stretched between you and me and all gone on as intended before. It was a grand mistake on both sides, but it is not irremediable, and we shall both be happier that it has been discovered not too late. A rash promise is better broken than kept, and this one should be if it left me the most desolate among men, one whom a woman's love should never bless. Pray heaven that I may be blessed with the sweetest of all loves—yours."

"Oh, Erle! Oh, Erle!" His vehemence had surprised that name from her lips. She had turned white as the dress she wore. She was shrinking before the burning fire of his gaze, she felt if she could really die in that moment that her spirit would be borne into eternity with the sweetest joy life could have brought her not untasted, but she never once lost sight of her duty and his. "Oh, Erle! to speak of heaven's blessing and such a purpose in one breath! A promise should be sacredly kept, carefully made and never broken. Heaven pity all if you should be really changed and she suffer through me! You must forget that you have ever said these words to me, as I shall forget I have ever heard them."

"I have not the right to ask it, but tell me only if you love me, Wilma, if you ever can. The rest is as fixed as fate, for I am sure of Ethel as I am of myself."

A little more of her self-command came back. A little more of all Miss Erle had said to her recurred, and knowing how her decision would affect not her after-happiness only but that of all to whom she owed much, that of all who had an interest or a pride in him, she saw more clearly still what was the only right course for her to pursue.

"You forget yourself—you forget what an impossible distance would be between you and me were you indeed nothing to Ethel. Oh, Mr. Hetherville, don't give me the pain of thinking that I am to be the cause of darkening your life, of blotting away the happiness which would have been yours without. Don't let me know that even unintentionally I have been the cause of bringing pain to them. I am grateful for your kindness, and I could not have been anything more if—if you were sure of all you said to me just now, and if there had never been another engagement. If you will promise me—if you have any friendship for me you *will* promise that Ethel shall never know of this."

"Ethel should know if it was for her own sake only, and I will *not* believe that any distance can be impassable between you and me—not even this. Ethel shall know, for my own heart's rebellion has taught me what is due to her. Disaffected eyes see clearly, and I know there is another whose single word would be dearer to her than my whole life. I have seen her look up into his face, Wilma, with a light in her eyes which was never there when she looked upon me. I am not mistaken in Ethel; she does not love me, and she will be happier with the bond between us broken. It shall be broken as I said before for her sake if not for mine."

"But if her heart should break, oh, Mr. Hetherville! And it would be so easy for you to love her even if true that you do not now. Men are so strong, and I think that women must be so weak. Ethel would never marry without loving you."

She believed that because she thought no woman's heart could remain indifferent to him, and she pleaded Ethel's cause more eloquently for her own weakness.

"If I come to you, Wilma, freed by Ethel's word and by Ethel's wish, with no word of my disloyalty to influence her, will you believe then? If I put the opinions of the world behind me; if I ask only what will bring perfect happiness to me, and what will injure no one in the wide world, will you believe and trust to me then? Until then I shall not ask a breath from your lips to assure me of hope."

The music died wholly out, and a second's stillness rested upon the rooms. In the midst of it he was gone from her side, leaving her white and shrinking and still in the shadow of the marble Minerva, with the light and fragrance of the room and the murmur of voices rising again seeming like the vivid impression of some distant picture, or like a floating scene in which she had no interest of her own.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE REPORTER'S SECRET.

"You are such a connoisseur in your art, Mr. Latimer; we must have your opinion of the picture."

Mr. Richland sent home this morning. Ethel, my dear, you will see that Mr. Lenoir is not neglected for a moment."

Mrs. Richland swept away with the young artist, and Justin Lenoir had taken the vacant place at Ethel's side. Crayton was a little withdrawn, turning a book of illuminated prints, morose and indifferent for the moment, and wholly withdrawn into himself.

"What charming evenings Mrs. Richland has the faculty of making hers," remarked Lenoir. "I think my sense of duty could not have been overruled by any less temptation than an evening here. It is the last opportunity of the kind I shall probably experience for quite a long time to come. Thanks to Mr. Richland's kindness I am well progressed in my work now, and I have a new incentive to hasten its conclusion. I seriously contemplate giving up my position here with the first of the year, and accepting another which has been tendered me, more congenial to my taste. The smoky city is endeared to me by much pleasant association, but I have not a tie to hold me here, or to force any great regret at leaving it."

"You think of leaving?" she asked. She was looking down, toying with the drooping ends of the gold and jeweled bracelet she wore. The fallen golden hair cast a little shadow over the pure fair face. Some wonderful blue tint and texture, rich, soft and lustrous, of which her dress was composed, lay about her in billowy folds; the very chain at her round white throat, slender and plain as it looked, would have cost three months of the rising young journalist's salary: the rings on her slender hands, with their value realized, would have brought a moderate little fortune that would have given him the advantages of which he was stinted now. Looking at her, so fair and so far removed from all aspiration of his, nothing in Lenoir's still face told of the short, sharp struggle assailing him for that instant, of his impulse to question the Infinite wisdom which had so placed them, the surge of a strong desire to battle over all obstacles, and wrench her away in the face of opposing rivals and his own insufficient dependence. An impulse quickly passed. Could he have seen into the depths of her heart, how it was aching and quivering under a like agony at the thought of their separation, how in her more yielding weakness the pain of seeing him daily and of experiencing even that greatest humiliation of knowing that unsought, unasked, she had let her love waver from the one whose right it was to him, neither knowing nor caring, never to know and never to care even if that slow, dreary pain should linger on and eat through her life as she felt it must, would be less than this pain of parting and of knowing that the way of their lives must widen never to come close again.

"I have the offer of a position on a New York magazine, quite an advance upon the one I hold at present. It will be to my interest in every way to accept it."

"Then I presume your friends here must submit with the best grace they may, to their loss sustained, and rejoice for your sake. Permit me to offer congratulation on that much happy fortune."

"Thank you most earnestly, Miss Richland. I will take it as the 'God-speed' which I have so few friends to offer me. I can truly say there is not one household in the two cities of which I shall bear away such kindly remembrances as of this."

"You will find new friends soon—new attachments to blot out the older lesser ones."

The hazel eyes were persistently downcast still, the fingers nervous in their idle motion, the golden head drooping more into the shadow.

"I neither make attachments nor break them soon," he answered, quietly. "I have drawn out a lonely life for myself, but a busy one. Pardon me if I presume, Miss Richland, but the world—your world—has not kept the secret of the enviable lot which is to be yours. I may not have another opportunity to wish you joy. I do wish it sincerely, as my truest friendship toward both of you demands. Hetherville is a noble fellow, a man whom I am better and prouder for having known; one nearly worthy of you as any man can be. From all my heart I wish you the great happiness the tender devotion of such a man cannot fail to bring."

If ever Ethel had thought tremulously that Lenoir's dark eyes had glowed upon her with any more than a friendly light, if ever she had thrilled in the passing belief that his heart was not utterly untouched; if ever she remembered the few quiet summer weeks when she had known him first, and they had been drawn in closer intercourse than ever in that rustic little village up among the mountains, and found excuse for her own alien affection in the deep enjoyment they had found there together, thought and thrill and self-pardon now had the slight base of their support crumble from beneath them. Could he be wishing her happiness with another if he had ever cared for her, wishing it so calmly, predicting it so positively?

"He never cared," her heart moaned, in its bitter pain. "And to me so soon to be another man's bride, this parting is death! I would rather die myself, or worse than that, see him die, than to know he could love another as I love him."

For one instant she had lifted her eyes, grown deep and dark with a dumb, anguished reproach in them to meet his gaze; for that instant seeing how composed and apparently indifferent to any deeper sentiment than he had expressed, shrunk, inwardly with scorn of her own weakness. Then the soft eyes dropped again, and the quiet, sweet voice thrilling him under the calm he had forced murmured her thanks.

"Your high estimate of Erle is well merited. He is also a warm friend of yours, as I am happy to report. Was Howard speaking across to you, Mr.

Lenoir? Some weighty argument to be deferred to your decision, no doubt. Go by all means and settle the disputed point."

Crayton closed the book of illustrated prints and approached. Had either chanced to have glanced toward him a moment before, they would have seen his eyes fixed upon Ethel's face with moody intensity; would have seen his mouth harden, and his sal-low face gloom over with a fierce, dark shade; would have seen a spasm convulse it before the usual cynical curves and stoical unconcern returned.

"Is the man blind that such a look in her eyes tells him nothing?" thought the reporter. "Can he not see what I see, that a word from him would tempt her to defy all the world—lose it all happily for him? Hetherlands and its master are less to that proud beauty's heart to-night than Justin Lenoir with his portion of hard work and uncertain fame before him. And if he knew it even, I doubt if he would utter the word which would call her to him. So much for that overstrained sense which men call honor! And that lovely creature for whom men have pined and hearts have broken, has her retribution in like kind with that she has inflicted. She will marry the husband that others have chosen for her, and reign the fairest mistress who has ever graced stately Hetherlands, and grow reconciled at last, after a time perhaps, Lenoir will lose his disappointment in the fight through life which he is sure to win, and marry when his hair is turning gray and no other fields to conquer shall leave him breathing space to remember his own loneliness. And long before that the reporter's place will be a blank, with no one to remember his presumption, no one to mourn his loss—an aimless, restless Bohemian gone to oblivion as a true Bohemian should, done to death through his own reckless folly."

The fierce sweep had passed over his face and left it morose and still again as these thoughts went through his mind. A changeable, inscrutable nature was that the reporter's generally careless aspect covered, a character with hidden depths and darker phases than those who knew the surface life only were apt to suspect. A nature which might have been strong and steadfast and noble, a talent which might have conquered a wider scope than opened to him in the simple reporter's world—a nature perverted, and a talent wasted, a mind misapplied, the better impulses checked and the worse passions fostered, he was that miserable being, a man bent upon wrecking himself in the face of his own knowledge of the consequences to surely come. Even that phase had succeeded to his usual careless impudence of demeanor when he stood beside Ethel as Lenoir moved away.

"What a pity you object to be written up, Miss Richland. Of course you do object, and all Jenkins's persuasions at some future hour of the night or morning shall fail to wring the faintest hint of a description from me. But you cannot well imagine what a temptation it is to resort to a flowing pen in subscribing to your praises."

"Pray don't contemplate yielding to the temptation, Mr. Crayton. Descriptive items are always detestable; anything closer than descriptive not permissible."

"Your wish is law. Why could not Mrs. Richland have favored us all with the fine points of that picture they have been discussing? If I haven't a taste for *chiara oscura* I have a cultivated talent for criticism. They are coming back, I believe, Lenoir lost in one of his raptures, and there is Hetherville bearing down from the opposite direction. No glimpse of Heaven but must fade before a reporter's vision!"

"Change to the mere earth, earthy. Let me have the pleasure of affording you a glimpse of the canvas; indeed, I believe the picture is really fine."

She rose up hastily. She had caught a sight of Hetherville's face, of the determined lines, the bright, bold eyes resting upon her with a purpose in them which gave her a sudden start and fright.

"What has he read in my face to bring that look into his eyes?" she thought, in quick alarm. "He looks as though my indecision had betrayed itself, as though he had some avenging interest in hand or as if all loss or ail gain hung in the scale of the moment. I must not—will not—cannot bear a word from him now. It is surely enough that I shall be true to my word and to Howard's hopes."

She moved away at Crayton's side, and the swift terror which had assailed her destroyed the opportunity Erle had hoped to gain of setting right this tangle between them that neither were deceived in believing clear and smooth. If she could only have known what the steadfast purpose in the blue bright eyes meant! If she could only have read the perfect understanding, clearer than her own, which had given him such confidence in her, such hope for himself! She moved away, some one else interrupted him, and the opportunity he was seeking was not found.

The picture hung in a side room, lighted but deserted. Ethel paused before it, glad of the silence, scarcely heeding the reporter's presence, a careless escort to whom she was giving so little consideration just then. Her only impulse had been to escape from Erle. What she feared most, his detection of the more than disquiet which had been swaying her, or of his undisturbed trust and his urging of the bonds they wore, she could not have told. Lost in conquering her inner self, she was not observing her companion. He had paused in apparent silent study of the canvas; but the moody look which had been dissipated for a little time, was returning to his face. He was not unobservant of her, absorbed as he seemed.

"Angel that she is, and with all my mad idolatry of her, even she could not redeem my life," he was

thinking. "I was born for the end which is not so far but I am sure of it. Selfishness is always a characteristic of the lot of us, and I am selfish enough to wish for just one expression of her sympathy, for one instant to claim her compassion and her kindness, more than any woman has ever given me yet."

She felt the softest of touches upon her hair, and glanced up quickly, scarcely knowing the changed face looking into hers, such a changed, despairing yet softened face that her heart went out in pity and half in awe of the unsuspected depth of mournfulness reflected there.

"If you will let me tell you and not be frightened or angry at knowing; if you will only think of me a little more kindly than any one else has done for many years, I shall be happier for feeling that you know how your gentleness and your sweetness have power to touch even such a callous heart as mine. If anything could do me any good, love of you would show me the way; there is no escape from the wreck which I was born to reach since it does not. No, don't speak! Your eyes tell me how sorry you are; all you could say, like everything else, would be useless now. The pity which may be felt is subtler than that which may be spoken, and it reaches me better. God bless you! One temptation which I have had before now I think will never come up again."

It was that temptation grown powerful once had led him to instill a momentary doubt of Lenoir in Hetherville's mind, a doubt which his varying better impulse caused him to dash away again in another instant.

That same light touch was upon Ethel's hair, and this time she knew his lips had caused it. More than that, a tear trembled there, moistening her hand as she put it up. But for that she might have questioned if she had not dreamed the rest, for yet while her pained soft eyes were turned upon him his face looked down upon her with its careless light glance, and his voice had changed to its usual accompanying tone—

"If you are through with the *chiara oscura*, Miss Richland! I leave all comment to Latimer. A happy motto that, and the better if it were oftener realized—'Tread not upon another's corns;' in other words, leave every man alone to ride his own hobby."

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE WESTMORELAND HOME.

For one of the not frequent times of his entire indolent life, Erle Hetherville was up with the sunrise. He was all ready for departure, furred overcoat, traveling-cap, gloves half-way on, and his cigar-case in a convenient outside pocket, as a maid-servant tapped at the door and entered with a little tray in her hands.

"There's coffee served in the breakfast-room if you would prefer it, Mr. Hetherville. Miss Erle is taking a cup in her own room, and the housekeeper sent this up to you. If you will come down to the breakfast-room you can have oysters and an egg and muffins or rolls and no trouble whatever, with plenty of time. Miss Erle hopes you'll not mind that she's not down, and would advise you to take a light breakfast at least, sir."

"Very good of Miss Erle, but I fancy I can endure a couple of hours' ride by rail sustained by a cup of coffee well as she. None of the family are stirring yet, I presume?"

He pulled off one glove and took up the cup of fragrant old Java, richly creamed as he liked it, the cup a great thin globe of china. Say what you may, a draught is always sweeter for being daintily served, and Erle, who, a moment before, would have declared it an impossibility to swallow any thing, sipped the contents with lazy relish, looking at the distorted reflection of himself in miniature thrown back by the inner surface of the gold spoon.

"Not yet. That is, no one but Miss Wilma; she came down to see that the coffee was made, and has taken Miss Erle's to her room now. Miss Erle will be ready and the carriage at the door in half an hour. Will you have any thing more, sir?"

"Thank you, nothing." He put down his cup and the girl went away with the tray. "No wonder my coffee was delicious," he thought. "A half-hour yet; well, surely something may be done in a half-hour."

He went down the stairs three at a time a half-minute later, and out upon the frosty avenue where the leafless trees rattled stiff branches and the early sun slanted his early roseate lances. There was elixir in the air that morning, stiff, bracing, healthful, and Erle squared his fine shoulders and drew in full aspirations as he hurried along the silent thoroughfare. Not silent for long. Those blessings of poor men's travel, the street-car, rumbled near at hand, and as he passed a corner came upon a group of gathered workmen, tin dinner-pails in hand, with others hurrying from alleys and side-streets. He took a car along with them, and stood balancing himself upon the rear platform, glancing in at the crowded interior and the rows of plain, intelligent faces presented there.

"Not apparently such a frightful lot to be poor after all," he thought. "Upon my word, I had no idea that 'up in the morning early' was such a delightful maxim to put into practice. Talk of tonics in comparison with the air, or of spirit-revivers in the same breath with a race down to Federal street and back again under circumstances such as these." The half-smile about the bearded mouth, the genial glow in his cheeks might have confined his happy spirits to a smaller scope still, might have summed the Alpha and Omega of all his exuberance in one word—Wilma.

He sprang down from the car as it turned into Federal street and crossed to the market, jostling his way through the crowd of early buyers to one of the numerous flower-stands lining the square. The vender was a boy, small and spare-faced and deli-

cate-looking as any of the fragile plants over which he hovered. The boy's pale face brightened at sight of Hetherville.

"Good-morning, Oscar, my boy! So you are at your post already, and give satisfaction, I hope."

"I hope so, sir. You're too late for the early lot of bouquets, all sold out, and the best ones not come over yet."

"That is a pity as I have neither time to go on to the store nor to wait here. I can trust to your selection, I suppose. One of your handsomest moss-baskets with fragrant cut flowers not so delicate as to wither all at once—pinks and pansies and mignonette and the like. I'll write the address for you—Miss Wilma Wilde, No. — Western avenue. I beg your pardon, sir, but it's a deuce of a jam here."

In stepping back he had jostled a tall, soldierly-looking man who was loitering in an idle way about the market and had paused at his elbow; his eyes after one sharp, scrutinizing glance over the young man's form were fixed upon the flower-stand.

"No apology. A man gets used to rough passages by the time he reaches forty and knocks about over half the known globe."

Erle, with no time to spare and a parting caution—"Don't neglect, Oscar, and as early as may suit your convenience"—was off again.

The tall man pressed close to the little flower-vender.

"One of your regular customers, that?" he inquired. "A gentlemanly young fellow."

"A customer at the house, sir. He got me my situation here only two days ago. The young lady that I'm to take the flowers to had been kind to me when I had only little roots and herbs to peddle, and when she stopped to speak to me in the street and told him all she knew of me, he just took one good look and asked where I might be found again. That very day he comes back and gives me a written recommendation and says he has spoken to the florist who has the great establishment on Market street, and he hopes I'll do my best because of the young lady who was the means of getting me into the place. He gave me some money to make myself more respectable than I was then, and said he'd look out to order his bouquets of me. I like the work, and it's doing me good already; I've been weakly-like, and you're right in saying he's a gentleman. Young Mr. Hetherville, his name is."

"And your young lady is Miss Wilma Wilde, of No. — Western avenue," glancing at the card which the boy had put down as he referred to his order-book. "I'll take one of these sprigs of myrtle for my button-hole—so! Never mind the change. Good-morning, my lad!"

He laid down a piece of silver and turned away with a half-embarrassed glance down at the decoration which was apparently novel to his tall, muscular strength and soldierly bearing.

"Enough sight better than peddling roots and herbs and getting kicks and cuffs about the streets," soliloquized the pale little flower-boy. "I get more kind words in a morning now than I had in a month then, and blessings on the sweet young lady that's done it all!"

Erle, walking rapidly back, reached the mansion with the last minute of the half-hour to find his aunt in the hall surrounded by bundles and bags and baskets, all the paraphernalia indispensable to feminine travel, the carriage at the door and a frown upon her face which cleared at sight of him.

"Oh, there you are, Erle. And we haven't two minutes to spare. You men always do wait for the last one, and then rush off at a way fit to break your necks. If you'll just take some of these and give me your arm down the steps, and—why, where's your valise?"

"All right; not a minute to spare, my dear aunt," responded Erle, catching her up and bearing her bodily to be placed in the waiting carriage. "And all these traps—pile 'em in anyhow at all, I suppose."

He made a dash back into the hall for some package left, but his hasty glance around failed to reveal the sweet, wistful little face of which he had hoped to obtain a parting view. Miss Erle had taken good care of that. Her own leave-taking with Wilma had been done above, and she profusely disclaimed having the other descend at all. The discovery of Erle's absence at the last minute gave her a thrill of alarm, which changed to relief with his appearance from without. That fear of some bitter disappointment was making her nervous; she was cherishing the possibility until it began to take a Gorgon shape in her view. In her secret heart she felt that Ethel might have displayed a trifle less indifference in giving her farewell in the presence of the family after the other guests had departed on the preceding night, that she would have sacrificed no maiden reserve by coming down this morning for a last parting word. But, at the same time, had she found her nephew lingering for a farewell with Wilma she would have most sternly resented such disloyalty as her active fears could discover toward his betrothed. That Erle would most willingly have exposed himself to the reproach was fortunately not displayed as *prima facie* evidence, and Miss Erle's ruffled equanimity grew calm again.

A few hours later they sat over a late breakfast in the old Erle mansion, shut in by Westmoreland hills, and overlooking the straggling Westmoreland village.

"Home again," sighed the lady in thankful aspiration. "It's true as gospel, Erle:

"Be it ever so humble there's no place like home!" Even Hetherlands would never have the same charm for me that clings to every corner and crevice of the old nest here. Home! you are just in a fair way to find a realization of the word. It requires home affection to give that."

"I'm not shut off from all sense of the word, then, my dear aunt. Really, you are right; I turn longingly to my dear ones left at Hetherlands."

"Your what, Erle?"

"My dear companions, home affections, and the like. How poor Junius must miss me! And Jupiter and Pluto, and Lucifer himself, I fancy. Even poor wind-blown little Gabriel, and—"

"Erle, what on earth!"

"Only my dogs and my horses, and the little pet niggers, dear old auntie. So fond of me as they all are, upon my word it's rather remarkable considering how particularly lazy I have managed to keep them all."

"You are thoroughly incorrigible on that and all practically useful heads, I do believe. It's a mercy there's to be a change, and I do hope Ethel may exercise her first power in setting things to rights at Hetherlands."

A shadow came over Erle's face. He rose hastily, pushing his chair back, and crossed to stand on the broad, old-fashioned, red-tiled hearth. A wood fire flamed in the ample throat of the chimney, and he looked into the leaping blaze with steady, absent eyes. His aunt followed and stood beside him, putting her fair, wrinkled hand upon his sleeve.

"There, never mind the old woman's interference, my dear boy. It's not natural that you and I should think alike, a spinster of three-score, and a fine young fellow of twenty-four, the greatest contrasts to be found in the world. Ethel will understand what is right better than I, be sure of that. And now I am going to see that the dear boy's old room is quite in order for him. It is always kept in readiness, and Prudence has had fires there for a week, according to my instructions. Do you care to come along?"

"My dear aunt, how sorry I am to disappoint you. Poor Prudence, too, will scarcely be persuaded to forgive the cold shoulder I must give her attentions. The truth is, I am to return by the afternoon train."

"Erle!" screamed his aunt, aghast.

"It is very important, or you should know I would not insist. I could not think of leaving you to make the trip alone, or the matter demanding my presence should not have been deferred to this hour. My dear aunt, you'll never find it in your heart to forgive me, I'm afraid, but I mean to break with Ethel."

"Erle!" It was not a scream this time, but the lowest and slowest of shocked utterances.

"We will both be the better off for that which it is my duty to do. I am confident Ethel never could be happy with me as she may be, as it is her lot to deserve. But I—oh! aunt Erle—can never be happy with any one, can never know any happiness after this except with Wilma. Oh, aunt Erle! thank God with me that we are not all made miserable by the discovery coming too late."

Miss Erle seemed turned to stone. She stood looking with coldly horrified eyes upon him; her fair wrinkled face turned hard, the soft white hair which had shaded her forehead, and the years of hope and pride which she had upon the fact of this projected marriage all laid waste in a moment, were like sharp pangs of remorse present with him.

"Say at least you will try to pardon me this which is so great a disappointment to you, aunt Erle. It is so much the best for all of us; I can't plead for anything less than that. It is my worst pain seeing you bear it so."

"You don't mean it, Erle, Erle! you surely don't mean it. With the pride of the Hethervilles and the Erles running in your veins you can't intend any thing so dishonorable. I've got a nightmare on me; I'm surely never awake in my own senses and my boy telling me that!"

"I'm sure of Ethel; if I were not I would sacrifice myself rather than her. She will be happier in her restoration to freedom, and, oh, dear aunt! all the world would not weigh in the scale against my love for Wilma."

It was only the same form of words lovers have used in a million cases before, but with Erle's rapt face before her, with his blue eyes so steadfast and earnest, tender and grave, that she could scarcely reconcile their change from then bold, laughing, defiant, she knew that every word had its echo in his soul. Knew how strong his determination was under his remorse at causing her this grief; knew that word or act of hers would never turn him from his own decision of right. She sat down without a word, and her silence, the cold horror stamped upon her face yet, the shock of the disappointment which he knew was possessing her, struck him with keener reproach than more demonstrative grief would have done.

"You will believe that it is for the best when you see the end," he said, gently. "Don't think too harshly of your boy—your own boy the same as ever if you will let him be so. And the little Wilma who, God willing! shall be my own some day—you can't help loving for her own sake. If I could take back a message of your kindness to her—if I might have the assurance you are not changed toward me!"

"Not changed? Erle, Erle! I fear me I am so changed I shall never know my own self again."

And, indeed, that impenetrable ice of reserve dropped so suddenly about her neither melted nor moved while he remained. She was stiff and still and silent, making no attempt to check him when he talked to her, not saying much and to so little purpose that he soon desisted and was simply quietly attentive until his hour for departure came.

"One thing I ought to say, I suppose," she remarked then, as he stooped to kiss her withered cheek. "I always meant to make you my heir, Erle, not that you needed anything more, but of kith and kin of mine you are the last. Now—"

"Now, aunt Erle, there shall be no question of

your disposal of any thing. At least one flaw which has troubled me before this shall have gone from between us. I never want any thing but the old love back again."

He went then more sorrowful and gloomy, and threatened by dismal forebodings, than his happy spirit of the morning could have deemed possible.

The ice did not break about Miss Erle even then. Nor yet later when Prudence, the old housekeeper and confidential manager for half her life of more perhaps than Miss Erle's domestic affairs, came to her with a troubled and anxious face.

"There's symptoms of a sickness down in the village," she said; "signs that I don't like in the least. 'It's come among the Biffins, that great family of little children, smothered in two close rooms together. No wonder they take every disease that's going. You'll have to get along without me, Miss Erle. I'm going down there to take the matter in hand before it gets the chance of a sweep, and the best of us.'"

CHAPTER XV.

A RESEMBLANCE.

ETHEL looked more than ever pale and *distract*, was more than ever quiet and appetiteless at the breakfast table that same morning. Not one to wear her heart openly upon her sleeve, this fair petted darling of two seasons' favor found not her least mortification in her own self-humiliation. With that as an inward reproach, with her woman's pride not proof against defeat yet sustaining itself to all except her own heart, this listless, silent Ethel moving about the rooms was not at all the embodiment of one's ideal belle who has reigned undisputed through a short triumphant term and is about to end her brilliant course by the brilliant marriage expected of her.

"Ethel is all right," thought Mr. Richland, in one of his complacently observant moods. "She feels the difference with Erle's absence let me warrant, for, however little disposed our young folks may be to turn sentimental after the popular fashion, there's more of the true ring of the metal under all than she has cared to acknowledge. A very long absence may conquer love, but a short one is more apt to prove it. It has all been as I foresaw; Erle's coming set the dear girl's misgivings at rest, and by my faith! it should require no stronger inducement than that handsome face and perfect manliness of his to overcome worse odds than simply a girl's shy hesitation and distrust of herself. His coming was none too soon, as even I can see; this society life is beginning to tell on her with a rather startling effect. I shall certainly advise a long season of travel and sight-seeing before they return to it. Gaslight and hot air and late hours will ruin any woman's looks, I suppose, if persisted in, though Gertrude stands them admirably. But then Gertrude is incomparable among women."

His complacent reflections were very comforting to Mr. Richland. The world, always disposed to treat him kindly, had for so long a time been his humble devotee that he quite overlooked the probability of any different phase ever being presented to him. His own comfort had been so well assured that it was quite out of all reason to contemplate any worse disaster than the small daily annoyances which are the gnats to buzz in the faces of the best and the greatest. His old unyielding pride and his individual satisfaction were both to receive a prop through the consummation of this alliance in every way so well calculated to gratify all concerned.

Ethel, reading all this in his kindly face, was pierced more deeply yet by that rambling pain within, as she steeled herself closer still to her own resolution. Come anguish to her own heart, come bitter humiliation and lasting concealed rebellious sentiment, she would not disappoint Howard, she would keep faith with Erle Hetherville in all except her hidden inner heart.

But oh, Ethel, Ethel! Had Justin Lenoir's deep, earnest eyes looked into yours, had his lips formed the word and his voice said it ever so softly—"Come," what then of the firm will to override all temptation? Is ever any resolution to be trusted, which has no depth of heart for its foundation? Yet with all the knowledge that should be ours the same game of cross-purposes goes on daily and hourly, and least often with the fair, happy termination of setting all straight.

It was after ten when the pale little flower-vender made his appearance. "For Miss Wilde," and the fragrant package carefully inclosed was given into Wilma's hands. She knew in a moment from whom it came while her fingers were yet busy with the silver paper unfolding it, before the little card with her address in Erle's writing assured her beyond a doubt. And conscientious little Wilma, her heart swelling with the proof of his tender remembrance, dropping her face over the fragrant mass for the briefest space, only drew away with the quick contraction which was a certain sign of troubled feeling appearing in her forehead.

"I have no right to receive them," she was thinking. "I would not—oh! for all the world, I would not be the cause of bringing sorrow to Miss Ethel. I was wrong without knowing at the first; now that I know, I must do all I can to put the wrong right. But oh! you darlings! And he sent you to me. Wilma, Wilma! remember they should have come to her."

And thus bringing herself to a reminder of her own strict sense of duty, Wilma detached the little card, and, taking the moist moss basket with its burden of bloom, went up to Ethel's room.

"From Mr. Hetherville," she said, as she placed it quietly.

And for once Mr. Hetherville has made an error of taste, I am afraid," Ethel remarked, glancing at it, in nowise aroused from her listless indifference.

"I have heard him say that the proper way is to choose flowers in character with their recipient. White roses and japonicas and calla lilies have characterized his choice for me before this, and I confess to rather disapproving of the change." Her white hand went carelessly over the mass, great loving-eyed pansies, sweet spice-pinks, blush rosebuds and modest mignonette, but turned away without removing one. "You may have them if you like, Wilma. In fact, Erle's theory would suit them to you far the best, and their greenhouse fragrance gives me a headache."

A headache more likely, as a reminder of how the "eternal fitness of things" was being marked in the case of them two.

Wilma took them away, that tremulous happiness at her heart as she thought what a delicate, far-reaching sympathy it was to distinguish itself so unmistakably.

"Surely I may keep them now," she thought, "not as coming from him but as Miss Ethel's gift."

There was another ring at the bell presently, and Mr. Crayton was shown into the parlor where the ladies had gathered, Mrs. Richland lying idly back in her chair, Ethel with some pretension of work in her hands, and Wilma reading aloud—as totally diverse a trio as might be often found, tenderly attached as these three had grown to be.

"This is an inexcusable breach of etiquette, of course," said the reporter, after the first greeting. "Won't you ladies show forgiveness of it by not letting my presence disturb you in the least? I haven't the faintest shadow of an excuse for intruding, I may as well tell you at first. The lawlessness of us Bohemians is our only law, though I promise not to make a repetition if this is an offense. Truth is, chancing into the neighborhood the law of attraction did the rest."

"You are very welcome," Mrs. Richland assured him, with that true courtesy which does not distinguish between guests. "You see for yourself that we accept your permission, Mr. Crayton, and receive you quite without ceremony."

"You'd be amused to see what sort of receptions I do get sometimes. I don't suppose you have any idea of what a powerful lever our newspaper world is under your stratum of society. The reporter who is called in under the gaslight to take notes of a grand glitter, a smash and a jumble to be separated into so many descriptions of toilettes and mingling shades with plentiful interspersions of aigrettes and coronets, cluster curls and pompadour braids, of magnificent parures and tasteful ornaments and drooping sprays and fair bouquets, *en decollete*, trained, looped, puffed and all the perplexities of your mantuamaker's art which we are supposed to conquer—that reporter is scarcely recognizable in his uncivilized Bohemianism, which may lead him to intrude after this fashion. I don't quite class myself with that ilk or I would not be discussing the variations quite so amiably."

"But what a free-and-easy world it is, that of your loved Bohemia. People say that after its fascinations have once been experienced there's no enticing one of you away from it. What Paris is to a true Parisian so is your delightful world which you carry about with you everywhere—an advantage the Parisian does not possess." Ethel looked interestedly up from her work—it seemed such a novel world to her, to whom such a vague comprehension of its hidden inner life had come in that phase he had shown her lately, scarcely credible now in the bright light of day with his careless presence and unconcerned surface appearance hinting of no depths.

"*Les pauvres Bohemiennes!* And yet this wild wide Gipsy life, which has the sky for its covering, its home all over the earth, as you say, is so very attractive that no temptation can sever a true Bohemian from the vagabond existence, no amount of influence or persuasion result in transforming him into average respectability or quietude. Once come to the state which I have arrived at, I assure you there is no redemption for any poor devil, and the worst or the best of it is that he rather glories in his lot than otherwise."

Saying it all with the reckless dash which gave added force to the words and was calculated to bring out the brightest tints of the picture, the froth and sparkle of the Bohemianism only was visible, none of the despair, the miseries, the want and waste and willful misuse of a life which almost invariably goes hand in hand with it, seeming the furthest of all realizations from his mind.

"There are regular gradations among us as in all other classes," he continued. "Those on the top are not such an immense remove from civilized beings, after all—Latimer and Lenoir, for instance. Apropos of Latimer, which suggests his art and accompaniments: Mrs. Richland, did you ever, in the 'auld lang syne,' which cannot be so far gone as to have you much changed, have a likeness taken and call it Rose? Moreover, were you ever dead and buried and resurrected to life again, after the fashion of three-volume romances of three centuries ago, when that interesting experience seemed the only method taken to outwit one's enemies?"

"I, Mr. Crayton!" The wide, dark eyes turned upon him slowly, their depths fathomless until a displeased surprise rose to them.

"Yourself, Mrs. Richland. I'm well aware that is a novel as well as impudent mode of questioning, but 'thereby hangs a tale,' which I hope may gain me pardon in your sight. That is, unless you abominate scenes from real life which run in the way of mystery and dramatic effect."

"You couldn't adopt any better plan for raising the natural Mother Eve we all confess to," laughed Ethel. "I can answer for Gertrude, in one particular at least. She has a morbid aversion to sitting.

and we have never succeeded in persuading her to have even a photograph taken. Artists of high and low degree, of all ranks, grades and pretensions, have exhausted their eloquence in vain, so I imagine it decided that Gertrude never could have lent herself to a representation and called it Rose. For the rest I can't take the responsibility of answering; such Phoenix-like emulation does not often appear after the actuality of 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes,' I believe."

"Ethel is quite right," said Mrs. Richland, calmly indifferent, and disclaiming any show of curiosity. "Certainly I have never died or been buried or resurrected, Mr. Crayton."

"And yours is such a very peculiar face, if you'll allow me to remark it. Certainly quite a singular coincidence, a remarkable affair, to say the least."

"What is a remarkable affair, Mr. Crayton? Don't keep us in suspense, please; our weaker nerves are not calculated to bear the strain, and anything to involve Gertrude, ever so remotely, must prove of vital importance, I am sure."

"Pray don't overwhelm me by taking it up so seriously. My rather absurd and unwarranted questioning sprung from a little incident which might form one of a series entitled Nights in the Streets. An incident not calculated to reflect to the credit of our twin cities, and, with a slight exception, a match-picture to Hetherville's mischance of not long ago, occurring within our sight, Lenoir's and mine, after we left here last night. Allegheny is not responsible, as perhaps you may be glad to know. We had crossed the bridge and were walking along Sixth avenue, near Penn, when a brief but decisive skirmish took place ahead. A couple of ruffians darted out to attack a gentleman, but the sporting gentry seemed to have reckoned without their host for once, since their selected victim proved himself more than enough for both of them. He dropped one with a back-hand sweep, and the other was glad to find his heels after a round or two. We were on the spot in a minute after the occurrence, and when the gentleman returned from the short pursuit he had made, cool as either of us, we all stood talking until the police came up and took charge of the one villain. Something glittered on the pavement in the light of the bull's-eye, and I picked up a little miniature wherein I would have declared it was your face painted, Mrs. Richland. Lenoir and I both remarked it, but the stranger claimed it as his property and assured us of our mistake. It had been the keepsake of a friend of his, he said, the original a lady named Rose, who had been dead and buried for seventeen years. The resemblance was remarkable, you may imagine, since it was powerful enough to attract the attention of both Lenoir and myself."

"Rather a strange coincidence, as you say," assented Mrs. Richland, indifferent as ever. "Resemblances are not uncommon, however."

"I rather congratulate myself over the interest aroused by that one, since it opens the pleasure of Captain Bernham's future acquaintance, and I flatter myself he is one man of the few worth cultivating."

"Of whom—what name did you say?" Mrs. Richland's face was turned away, but her voice was soft and clear and bell-like, a peculiar voice just as hers was a peculiar face.

"Captain Leigh Burnham, a deuce of a handsome, strong-built, soldierly fellow. My wonder is that the others had the temerity to attack him. But, by the way, you will soon have a reputation for resemblances. One of our mutual friends discovered another, rather vague, I'm afraid—Dr. Craven Dallas, I'm meaning. The old fellow appeared so exercised over the matter that I assured him of the fact with which I chanced to become acquainted—that you have no blood-relatives to share such an honor. I believe I was right in that."

"Quite right, Mr. Crayton." Her head came back to its former position, the face to his view, and he remarked how perfectly marble-like it was in its contour and coloring.

"And that reminds me of what I had nearly forgotten," supplemented the reporter; "that I am summoned to appear in the case at the alderman's office, this afternoon."

He took his leave soon after, and the short fall day went quietly by in the mansion. Wilma had been busy all the day, and at nearly dusk went out to a store on a neighboring street to match the silks Ethel was using.

"I would rather go than not," she said when the latter made a remonstrance. "I neglected my usual walk to-day, and need a trifle of freshening up."

She went and had returned to the very shadow of the mansion itself, when she was caught suddenly from her feet, folded close in strong masculine arms, and kissed in fierce, fond passion by bearded lips. Then she was put as suddenly down again, and a tall form strode rapidly away and was lost in the gloom.

CHAPTER XVI.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

"SEE here, Ethel. You haven't been doing any such foolish thing as quarrel with Erle, I hope?"

She was passing in the dusk but turned back with her brother's words. He was walking the wide upper hall, waiting for Mrs. Richland's dinner toilette to be completed. It was to be a night out and the task of dressing was rather prolonged. Mr. Richland's natural domesticity rather inclined toward a disfavor for the empty drawing-rooms, and after fifteen years of wedded life he was sufficiently lover-like to wait in attendance upon his wife.

"Certainly not, Howard."

"You relieve me. I could make nothing else out of his strange actions. Upon my word, his solemn physiognomy almost affected me with some active

apprehensions, and he would like a private interview if you have the leisure, though he declined a seat at the opera and his own chances for the evening."

"Erle, Howard? He went to Westmoreland this morning, did he not?—and for a week's time, I am positive his aunt said."

"So I had understood, and his unexpected return gave me my first start when I met him at the door a few minutes ago. He is waiting below now, in the library. I believe he came here straight from the train, though I remember his saying something of taking up his own apartments. And, by the way, Ethel, Gertrude tells me there will be no delay on account of trousseau or other preparations. There has been a reply to her order, and the goods themselves will be forthcoming within the month. So, if Erle broaches naming the day, I couldn't find a single objection in the world to any early date. I have had New Year's Day in my mind, but it is your prerogative to be suited in regard to that. Shorten the time by all means if it agrees better with Erle's no doubt impetuous desires."

"Oh, my dear brother, certainly not sooner than that. Indeed, Howard, I am half-inclined to resent this intense anxiety of yours to rid yourself of a troublesome incumbrance. Fortunate that I am inclined to assert my right, or you would be marrying me out of hand whether or no."

"Well, well, Ethel, you understand why I am anxious, my dear. And now don't let me detain you."

She passed on, but not down immediately. She paused at Mrs. Richland's door and went in at finding her alone. She was already dressed and turning over the contents of a jewel-casket absently. She paused with a smile at seeing her fair young sister-in-law.

"How prompt you are, Ethel. And you are in time to settle a vexed question. I can't quite decide what to wear to-night in the way of ornament."

"Diamonds, by all means, with that ruby moire, Gertrude. Indeed you ought never to wear anything but diamonds. You have been born to them and all brilliant things in destiny. I wonder if life is a fatality from first to last?"

"What has turned your thoughts in that strain, Ethel? You have not found any dissatisfaction in your own, I hope?"

"Not probable, since I have always been so kindly guarded. I have wondered sometimes what when I have been inclined to doubt myself—I suppose we never are sure of ourselves until we are put to the test. Take your case for example. If you had not loved Howard as you do, if you had married him out of gratitude or from a sense of duty say, only having the highest respect and appreciation for his noble qualities, would you have been contented, have always kept your duty toward him in view, have grown perhaps into some approach of the peace which I am sure you must have mutually enjoyed?"

Ethel's face was not averted but her eyes were not lifted to meet the scrutinizing glance of the other darker ones. Those deep, inscrutable eyes of Mrs. Richland had a subtle power of their own which could penetrate more clearly than Ethel's troubled mind just then would care to be probed.

"I fancy such cases are more common than you imagine, my dear," she answered, composedly. "If it had been my case as you have just put it, I am sure I should never have suffered one pang of regret thro any lingering indecision of my own, but would have found such peace and such content in his tenderness and his strong love as would have reconciled sacrifice and made sweet any after trial which might be bravely borne for his sake. I have little enough faith in that sentiment of love which has had no trial and none but a fanciful existence, Ethel; I have every faith in the reality with the plain knowledge of its strong, earnest foundation and the perfect trust to be reposed there. High respect and appreciation of noble qualities are the truest bases upon which an enduring trust was ever built."

Ethel's eyes lifted now freely and smilingly.

"No one could have a truer experience to speak from, Gertrude. Has Howard spoken to you particularly of Erle and—and me—and New Year's Day?"

"I know what hopes he has built upon all three, Ethel."

"You may tell him, if you like, that I shall be ready then, provided Erle wishes it. He is below now, come unexpectedly back from Westmoreland and waiting for me. Ah, Wilma! I was almost uneasy, thinking you had not returned yet."

Wilma had come into the room, just catching the last of Ethel's speech, half-hesitating, on the point of retiring again.

"I have been back for ten minutes at least. Cicely was busy, and I thought you might be needing something. Shall I put your jewels back, Mrs. Richland?"

"If you like, Wilma." Mrs. Richland had clasped diamonds at her throat and upon her wrists, but she did not move away. The steady eyes were looking at her own fair semblance in the glass, abstracted and far-seeing, but, preoccupied as they seemed, they caught Wilma's upward, anxious glance.

"What is it, my dear? Why, child, are you ill? You look to be burning with fever."

"I am quite well, only flushed. Is it Mr. Hetherville has returned unexpectedly whom Miss Ethel has gone down to meet?"

"Yes. We were mistaken regarding his intention, evidently, or he has changed it."

"And it was he, though I did not think it," mused Wilma, a hotter flush burning her cheeks. "What should I do—what can I do now? It gives me such a guilty sense, though Heaven knows I would sooner die than bring misery to any of them."

Searching eyes were on the flushing, agitated face. Mrs. Richland drew back and sunk down

into a chair, the ruby silk draping about her in rich, glowing folds, the diamonds flashing back the light.

"Come here, Wilma," she said, quietly. "Something is troubling you, and trouble can sometimes be better borne when the knowledge of it is divided. Sobbing and nervous and distressed, I am sure the blame is not yours, whatever the matter may be. Sit here and tell me, if you can."

Wilma dropped on a low stool at her feet, her slight form shaken, her hot, tearful face buried in her hands. She lifted it in a moment, more composed, wistfully deprecating.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Richland, it is the fear of trouble coming through me, the fear of repaying all your kindness with sorrow and disappointment. I would so gladly bear all sorrow and all pain if it might be spared to any one in this dear house."

"Go on, Wilma. Tell me what sorrow—what pain!" The white cool hand was passed gently over the girl's forehead with a touch which was quietly soothing now, such a deep, soft light in the steady eyes that Wilma's heart ached to its depths.

"Oh, Mrs. Richland! I am afraid that through me, unhappiness may come to Miss Ethel, disappointment to all of you. Indeed, indeed, if I might undo it now by going away, I would go gladly. If I had never come there would have been no change, as I fear there is, in Mr. Hetherville."

The soft, cool hand was still, the slightest change came over the marble-like calmness of the perfect face.

"Mr. Hetherville!" The little dusky head was drawn with a sudden swiftness to the lady's shoulder, the quiet cheek laid against the burning, throbbing brow. "Tell me here, Wilma. Has this change which has come to Mr. Hetherville also touched you?"

A quick comprehension had come to Mrs. Richland. A change, too, had come to her, almost a relieved change it would seem, and that caressing, magnetic touch quieted Wilma until she could tell steadily all that had passed between her and Erle on the preceding night.

"He promised to remain the same to her unless her own word and her own wish released him, but to-night—to-night, as I was coming in from the street, just at dusk, some one—a tall man, whom I had not seen in the shadows—caught me in his arms and kissed me on the cheeks and lips and forehead. I turned fairly sick with fright, but he put me down and was gone in a moment. I did not think of its being Mr. Hetherville. I thought he was in Westmoreland, to remain for a week."

Her sobs choked her there. Mrs. Richland's quieting touch was gentle as before.

"I think we can trust to Mr. Hetherville," she said. "He is quite incapable of a dishonorable act, I am sure. You are not to blame in the matter. But, Wilma, child, it may be better for your own sake if the change in him proves to have been but the impulse of the moment, to be lost in the truth of his love for Ethel. If it proves more than that, the discovery is better made now, as he said—far better than if they were bound by irrevocable ties."

The quiet intensity of her expression startled and stilled Wilma. They sat in the same position for a moment more, then Mr. Richland, grown impatient of his solitary march up and down the wide dim hall, tapped at the door, interrupting them.

Ethel had gone down to the library, where Erle awaited her. He had come straight here from the train, as Mr. Richland had surmised. The knowledge which had broken upon him with such powerful force would permit him no rest until his future position was decided. He had not lost sight of his promise to Wilma; it must be Ethel's will, not his, that should give him liberty. He had meant it fully when he declared he would sacrifice himself rather than her. Had he believed it for Ethel's truest happiness now, he would have sealed his lips above every remonstrance, and given no sign. But he felt sure of her heart as he was of his own; he had not a doubt but that, in bringing about the freedom which he was so sure of gaining, he would break lateful bonds for her.

With that settled purpose in his heart, he was waiting, when the door swung back and she came in, straight up to him, with a brighter smile than the fair face had worn for him in all these later days they had been together, both hands put out with that winning grace which had always been one of her charms.

Ethel's lingering, long battle had been fought out in those few minutes passed in her sister-in-law's room. A long, lingering battle, the end of which she had marked long since, but not until then had she really conquered that stubborn enemy found in herself. Her sacrifice had been promised before this, for her brother's sake, and by the reflex of the pride so bitterly wounded through her own weakness; but Gertrude's words let a new light in upon the sacrifice which changed it to an ennobling duty.

"With my own full knowledge of Erle's true worth, with my own earnest desire to bring him all he expects from me, wifely devotion to him very soon, surely my task will not be so very hard to learn with so much returned for the little that is asked," she said to herself, and went into his presence with the glow of conscious approval warming her heart and appearing in her frank greeting.

"What a surprise you have given me," she said, "a delightful surprise. I did not expect you for a week at least. There has been no mischance, nothing to give you apprehension, I hope."

Something in his face roused her quick alarm. He had taken her hands, meeting her free, affectionate glance with one doubtful and searching. His confidence was wavering for the first. Never before had she seemed so genuinely affectionately trustful, never before had he felt so regretful of the bond between them.

"No mischance, nothing unfortunate in the way of actual happening, Ethel. And I have come back purposely to arrive at a thorough and perfect understanding with you. Sit here while I say what I have to say; I will not keep you long."

She rested her hand upon the back of the chair he placed for her and remained standing, her hazel eyes fixed inquiringly upon his face, that lately gained strength of hers bearing her unwaveringly before him.

"We entered upon our betrothal six years ago, mere inexperienced children both of us, not even understanding the sacred nature of the trust we were taking upon ourselves. Under almost any other circumstances the old tender folly would have been spent long ago, the remembrance nothing more than a matter for laughing comment now. We were kept to it by the approbation the proposed alliance met upon both sides; we had no test of difficulties to overcome, not an obstacle which might have roughened our way but was smoothed from it by the watchful care of others. For six years the same end has been steadfastly fixed before the sight of both; we have each been impressed with a conviction that to deviate from the straight path leading to it would be such a breach of honor and good faith that we could never redeem ourselves from the stigma it would cast. We have come very close to that end at last, so close that there will be no possibility of turning back after this. Is it your wish to go on, Ethel? Has there been no outreaching or no craving for any other destiny than that linked with mine? Is there not love dearer, another lot to be shared with more promise of sweet content than ever thought of mine afforded? If any other life can hold better happiness for you, Ethel, it is due to us both that the truth should be spoken now. Don't fear to speak it now from the inner depth of your heart, and remember, it will be doing only the same justice to me as to your own life."

The sweet, earnest face not drooping before his gaze, the soft eyes looking wistfully into his, saw in his fixed and resolute expression only the strict rectitude of a noble soul, the doubt of her best happiness being assured, the willingness to advance if at the sacrifice of his own, and never before had she felt so nearly drawn, so close to a comprehension of purely quiet happiness such as she was sure to find with him.

"It is like you to be so nobly considerate, so wholly disregarding of self in remembrance of me. I appreciate and thank you for the kindness, Erle. It is best that there shall not be even a lingering misapprehension between us. If ever any obstacle existed between our free trust in each other, it exists no longer now. If I ever had a temptation to waver from the first spirit of our attachment it is gone for all time. As for you, I will not wound your true heart by even a doubt. To show how thoroughly I trust you, Erle, I am going to do what will give all most joy, I believe, name next New Year's Day for our wedding."

The lights danced before his eyes, the color faded from his lips and he staggered dizzily, but she never suspected that her hardly-found submission dashed all his cherished hopes and wrung his heart with as keen anguish as she had ever felt.

CHAPTER XVII.

A REVELATION.

THE Western avenue mansion was still. Lights were turned down here and there; the jets in the halls were at a brilliant blaze, but in the chambers and in the drawing-rooms there were only softened glows leaving twilight obscurity over all, and deep darkness in the corners. The party for the opera had left an hour before. Erle, who had declined Mr. Richland's invitation so positively, changed his mind with Ethel's solicitation, remained to dine with the family, and made one of the party for the evening.

Wilma was not down at dinner. She was calmed and less weighed upon by her apprehensions after unburdening herself to the kind benefactress who had brought such a change into her old sad life. It was not like the same life, this to which hers had turned, warmed by tenderest consideration from all about her, no difference marked by word or look between this high, proud family and her lowly station. They had adopted her into their hearts, and the fullest gratitude, the deepest loving respect went out to them in return. Unconscious of the wrong it meant, Erle's handsome face, which had appealed to her tenderest pity, first when it lay blanched and pain-wrung upon the pillow, Erle's voice which had a sweetness in it for her only that was never carried to another ear, Erle's bold, bright eyes which had looked into hers with a conscious possession of the secret her trembling heart held, a happy light of confidence and rapture of triumph in that knowledge, and his own belief that Ethel's bond was loosely worn as his own—Erle, in himself, had been received into that deepest tenderness of the girlish inexperienced heart whose first freshness gone out to him would never be reclaimed, would never turn with the same full faith and sweet trustfulness to any other. That much had been done, and then her knowledge came. Between Ethel and her must lie the misery and the humiliation which that knowledge brought, and she had been the usurper of Ethel's right and Ethel's previous reign. It was no more than just that some suffering should follow; there is never a wrong however unconsciously or unmeaningly done, but is followed by retribution of some sort for the moral law broken. And her willing, gentle spirit would have borne it all if she might only so avert like suffering from them. Mrs. Richland's words had given her one little gleam of hope that it might be averted still. If his love for her might prove but the passing impulse of an hour—if this disloyalty to Ethel might prove but

a wavering indecision which, faced by the test calling for the renunciation of his love of six years standing, might fail before it—if he should return to his old allegiance, forgetting her as she had begged of him to do, the unhappiness and disappointment which threatened might be safely passed. Safely passed even for her, for Wilma's best happiness was always found in administering to the joy of others. She might be saddened, grieved, wrung to the heart, but her sweet, yielding spirit would find its own reward in the consciousness of duty well done.

She was to have her endurance put to the test very soon. She was waiting still in Mrs. Richland's room, where Cicely had laid out the ladies' opera cloaks, gloves and fans, when Mrs. Richland came up from below and drew her aside out of the maid's hearing.

"Dear child, no need of reproaching yourself further, I hope. I fancy the misunderstanding which must have existed has come to its happiest end for all. If Erle wavered he has found strength to be firm at last. They are the same confessed lovers as before, and they have named the wedding to take place on New Year's Day. Be thankful that it has ended so, Wilma."

"I am, dear Mrs. Richland; I am thankful with all my heart. It is a weight off my mind, and a great relief. Do they look happy as though nothing could come between them now?"

"They will be happy. Two such noble natures, so truly assimilated, can not fail to draw out the very best of mutual affections. Ethel looks it fully, brighter and fairer, more loving and trusting than I have seen her before. Erle is at least resigned. I can not even guess at what has passed between them, but the manner of both might point that a lover's quarrel has just been happily terminated."

Sympathy with Wilma's state of mind prompted her to touch so lightly upon Erle's demeanor—gallant, closely attentive, almost wildly gay it appeared. With her knowledge she might have guessed what never occurred to her—that it was forced gaiety. Our own individuality is so apt to influence our judgment of others, and Mrs. Richland was so accustomed to keeping her soul-life so closely locked under that marble, unchanging exterior that her sympathy had not reached to the despair which turns reckless, and Erle's recklessness was so tempered by that sterling honor which pointed out his course so clearly now, that his last thought of deviating from it had departed.

A little later the party, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Richland, Ethel and Erle, quit the house. Cicely went down to gossip in the housekeeper's room, and for the first time since her coming there the great house seemed intolerably silent and lonely to Wilma. She went down the staircase presently, into the dimly-lighted drawing-room. She had taken a book with her, but the subdued glow, the shadowy nooks and corners were in better unison with her mind just then, and she dropped into a chair without altering any arrangement of the room. It was a sore heart throbbing within her breast, although she was so truly grateful for the end of her worst apprehensions. She told herself again, sitting there in the dusk, that an impassable gulf must have stretched between Erle and her had he been free when they met. All of wide, fair Hetherlands, all of the pride of the Erles and Hetherilles combined, all of the hopes based upon him and the ambition nurtured in him, must have come between. For his sake she must have borne her own grief just the same, which was less poignant as it was through her fidelity to Ethel. How long a time had passed she did not know, when the door-bell tinkled through the silent house, and some one was admitted into the brightly lighted hall. Some one's hand was laid upon the door, and a voice, whose cool, even accents she knew, said very distinctly there:

"The family are out, I am very well aware, my good fellow. In fact, knowledge of that is my reason for being in. Be kind enough to take my compliments—compliments of Dr. Craven Dallas, you understand—to Miss Wilde, and request her to accord me the favor of an immediate interview."

William Thompson had no guard against the doctor's smoothly-decisive enunciation, and was moving away unwillingly when Wilma herself appeared upon the scene.

"I am here, you see, Dr. Dallas. You may light the room, William, before you go, if Dr. Dallas will come in."

It was Dr. Dallas's very evident intention to come in. He had deposited his hat and walking-stick upon the rack, and his overcoat followed them. He crossed the threshold into the drawing-room then, sinking his feet deep into the thick, rich carpeting, and throwing himself into a seat with the complacent abandon and approving satisfaction of his surroundings. William Thompson turned on the gas and adjusted the shades, and withdrew, with a backward dissatisfied glance at Wilma's little figure, and the tall, thin form of her guardian. The man was a philosopher and a fatalist in his way, and no bad physiognomist, considering his opportunities.

"I haven't taken any love to that Dr. Dallas," he reflected, as he went. "It hasn't a good cast to that face of his, nor yet a good look in his eye. Show me a man that's forever looking sideways, and forever squinting at you unbeknownst, and I'll show a villain that's on the straight road to the gallows if he gets his proper deserts. That Dr. Dallas ain't meaning any good to our Miss Wilma, I know. Her guardian, indeed! and if he was any kind of a proper-minded guardian he would give up his pretensions to that same, and leave her to them that'll care more for her in a minute than he'd be apt to do in a week. I don't like his look at her—like a cat gloating over some poor little helpless mouse, and she so unconscious, dear soul! Well, well! what is to be will be, whether it comes to pass or not; and I'll give my head for a football to any one as wants

it if that same Dr. Craving Dallas don't make a worry in this house yet with his sneaking in at odd hours, and his being like a lord to us, and so smooth and oily and the dust-ain't-good-enough-for-me-to-lick when the master and mistress are by in the way of seeming dreadful humble before them. Take my word for it, he'll be the serpent in this derelictable Paradise, than which I defy any man to show me one more so."

It is to be presumed that William Thompson meant delectable, and though his analogy may have been a little obscure, and his construction far drawn, his observations were not so very wide of the mark as they readily might have been, and his sentiments in the main were quite correct.

Wilma sat down facing her guardian, trying to be glad for so much kindly consideration shown by him, as well as she was grateful for all the tenderness of the new, true friends she had found, but that dread with which the doctor's presence always inspired her, interfered sadly with her thankfulness for the favor of this unlooked-for visit.

"How is my dear little girl to-night?" asked the doctor's smooth accents, as his shifting gaze wandered away from her into the furthest corners. "Not looking as well, I fancy. A trifle sadder, a trifle more wistful and wan than when I saw her last. A touch of the blue vapors are very unsatisfactory company. Not at all a good state of mind for one so young and so hopeful and so cheerful as you to cherish. Is there less satisfaction in your life here than before? Has the charm of newness worn away and the reflex of neglect already taking place of the favor shown at first? These fair philanthropists have a fashion of backsliding, I'm afraid. I might have told you not to expect too much too long, but what use of poisoning the pleasure for you while it lasted. It is one of my principles, my dear—a praiseworthy principle, is it not?—not to stir up the dregs of bitterness while any of the sweet draught remains at the top. Take the bitter all at once, and a fresh cup afterward, if you like, but don't ruin the effects of the two by mixing them. Odd philosophy for a physician, perhaps, but none the less sound for that. And so the old life and the new are not cut so wide adrift but the loneliness the one may extend into the other!"

"I would not wish them so widely separated that my remembrance of those experiences should not keep me constantly grateful for the great change. You are mistaken in supposing I can have any cause for unhappiness. They all grow more kind, if that be possible, with every day."

"Then there is some other foundation for that sadness. I am not mistaken in regard to that; a very strong affection is seldom mistaken in its intuitions, Wilma. You have found something lacking, then. Some element is lacked to complete your thorough contentment. They are kind, very kind, but they have their gayeties, and your seclusion is infected with loneliness, is that it?"

"Oh, no, indeed! I have no desire for anything more than I receive here; I hope you will believe that. There is not anything, not the least, I would have changed if I might."

"And that is not like youth and hope. It is only natural you should look forward to more. It is scarcely possible you can be thoroughly content with your slight tenure upon your position here. Made much of just now through the uncertain vagary of a fine lady's whim, the same will take another turn and you will be all the worse off for having been a favorite for a time. The old sequestration and narrow limits and bare discomforts of the old house on the Manchester road, with only Mrs. Gerrit's companionship, will be the less endurable for the glimpse of all that is luxurious and refined."

Wilma made no reply as the doctor paused. His words did not demand one, and her heavy heart grew heavier for such ominous prediction. Coming from him it might mean that it was his intention, sooner or later, to remove her from this fair, rich mansion which was so freely her home, back to the old bare, forbidden precincts where seventeen dreary years of her life had been passed.

He was watching her as he always watched everything, furtively. His keen eyes read the weariness in her face, read more closely into her gentle, guileless heart than she had any suspicion of him doing.

"I wonder if any impulsive young lover would take much encouragement from such complete indifference," he mused, "from hidden mournfulness, perhaps, over a loss which she may not be inclined to acknowledge even to herself. Very kind of my good and useful friend, Crayton, to give me an inkling of how matters stood. Very sharp eyes our careless reporter has, and uses them to advantage, which is more than better men always do. Deucedly sharp and penetrating, and I might question the disinterested kindness which led him to call upon me this afternoon with the result of his observations; I might be a little inclined to keep shy of him but for the devil's recklessness which is taking him to destruction and leaves him no better care than to see all others follow the same easy road. I have always found an advantage in cultivating miscellaneous acquaintances; there is always some good to be got out of every man if you only know how to strike him. And really I don't know that I could desire a different state of mind in our little creature of conscience here."

"My dear Wilma," he said, aloud, "I am afraid that in comparison with the later interests which have engrossed you, my anxiety for your happiness may have failed in comparison. I think you cannot fully comprehend how entirely I am devoted to you and to your advancement. I told you truly that I had sacrificed my own desires to your welfare. Since that, developments have been reached which point to a different course, one to gratify my hopes as nothing else could, and at the same time to estab-

lish you in the place for which nature has fitted you, to which you are entitled by right. I have it in my power to insure your life, from this time forward, in the midst of just such surroundings as these. The power to place you on a footing in every way equal to that enjoyed by these people about. Better than even that—to assure you of your right to a life and a position in the world second to none. I think you have felt it keenly, sometimes, in knowing yourself outcast from all kindred, in doubting your right to the name you bear, in being so utterly a stranger to the secret of your own existence. It was very carefully kept from you. It was kept from all the world, and falsely represented where utter concealment was not possible. It is surely not needful to ask if it is your will to pierce the mists at last."

Wilma heard as it seemed with a sudden stopping of all the blood in her veins. Her heart stood still. She grew faint before she seemed able to breathe again. The secret of her life, the knowledge of the hidden past which had loomed darkly over her, in this man's hands! The intensity of her expectation had its first chill in that. That the secret which he boasted as a power was to come through him struck her quick intuition as having some sorrowful if not wicked depths of history to unfold. Her eyes, chained to his thin, fallow, unmoving face were eagerly and painfully attentive, but her lips formed no words.

"There must be something given in return for so much gained, my dear Wilma," the smooth, low tone continued. "I have been careful to conceal that which my mature judgment assured me was wild, hopeless folly in a man of my age—my long enduring love for you. Little Wilma, you never suspected, I dare say, that the fatherly affection I have evinced for you was more than that; you never supposed that the heart which has not had a near or a dear interest for a score of years could be thrilled and freshened by your sweet, gentle influence—that one seeming so absorbed and so isolated as I, could be loving—faithfully, earnestly, tenderly—*you*. Ah, my child! the best part of what our lives might be is very often hidden. But the necessity for that concealment has changed with me. It will add all this that I have hinted at to your advancement if our interests be identified, and to that end I ask you what I might never dared have asked otherwise, to join your life to mine, Wilma; to be mine, my wife."

She sat as if stunned. Of all words she might have expected to hear from his lips these were the last. Of all men in the world with whom any thought might have linked such a possibility, he was the very last.

"I have taken you by surprise," he proceeded. "I hoped you might have been not wholly unprepared for it; I have tried to convey my loving sentiments in a manner to give you some knowledge of the truth. Think for a moment, Wilma; think of all I tell you this offer of mine means; a place for you high and proud as these Richlands possess, and luxury to surround you, myself as your husband, and my first object always devotion to you; think of all that and give me your answer—simply yes or no."

Her eyes, fascinated and horrified, fixed upon his face, had not wavered away. For once his were still holding her as if by a magnetic power. She had rallied far enough to think, however; she had gained the power of speech again.

"It can be nothing but no—no! I am surprised, grieved, but I think—I hope you will not much care. You mean it as a kindness, and I thank you for that, but I could never have any different answer for you, Dr. Dallas."

"I hope and I think you will reconsider that, Wilma. You do not yet know what all your refusal involves."

"If it means all of the knowledge you say, my answer must still be the same. I can never be anything more than simply grateful for your kindness. I shall be grieved to know that you are disappointed through me. If it is best for me to know that secret which you hold, it will come at some time in some way. I can not even ask you to tell me. I do ask you no matter what advancement might come to me, to let it remain untold, and let me remain ~~own~~ even to myself if harm should come to any one through the telling."

Matthew Gregory's last words were in her mind, then; Matthew Gregory's stern, abhorrent look as she remembered it, causing her to shrink with a dread of apprehension. If the choice had been put to her then and there, it is most probable she would have chosen to bury all knowledge even from herself forever. But the choice was not to be left with her.

"If only as a duty to myself the matter should be dropped. And there is some one else involved—very deeply involved, it may turn out, unless you choose to shield her. As my wife only you will gain the power to do it. You think a great deal of your friends here, of your Miss Ethel, of Mrs. Richland. Suppose either of them should be threatened with worse trouble and misery than you can well imagine being visited upon them. Suppose the choice is yours to bring degradation and sorrow upon either of them, or to avert such, which should be sacrificed, they or you—supposing yours to be a sacrifice?"

"Oh, I hope I may never be the cause of bringing pain to them. I think I could bear anything rather than that. Surely, Dr. Dallas, no past interest of mine can reflect sorrow upon them."

"Something worse than sorrow perhaps," answered the doctor, grimly. "My dear child, human creatures are not born into the world except of human parents, and the sins of the parents may sometimes be brought to recoil upon themselves instead of coming down as heritages to the children. It

will not be my fault if it is so in your case unless you will it differently. You have been told simply that your mother is dead, but I know of my own evidence, gained in person, that your mother lives to-day. She lives. Suppose I tell you more—that you have seen and know her? Suppose I tell you that the discovery of your identity to the public now would mean sorrow, humiliation, disgrace to her, that it would drag her down from a proud height, that it would stamp her life with a misery which all time could not efface? Suppose I tell you that your unknown mother is your benefactress of to-day, Mrs. Richland?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE OPERA.

THE Opera House was well filled that night. The curtain had just gone down on the first act, and during the stir consequent, the Richland family, fashionably late, entered, and took possession of their own private box. The advent of the Richlands at any time was always the occasion of a flutter of attention and comment. The banker and his wife were a magnetic attraction to those moths of society that so constantly flutter their admiration about wealth and beauty. Ethel, belle of two seasons, flirt, coquette, sweet despoiler of men's hearts, as she had a reputation for being—the world always gives that to those qualities which win irresistibly, forgetting how impossible it must be to respond to the many—Ethel might have counted her devotees, declared or otherwise, by the dozen, even in that audience. And Erle, big, blonde, handsome, matching admirably at her side, lent a completing touch to the harmony of the group, whatever his appearance there may have caused in the way of jealous or envious twitches in the minds of not wholly disinterested lookers-on.

A fair, well-matched couple, certainly. So thought complacent, self-satisfied Howard Richland, as he turned from them to bend in lover-like attention toward his wife. So thought half the people there who had a knowledge of that long-standing engagement, so romantic, so refreshing to meet with in our prosaic age, a child-love grown up with their growth, lasting, and to be consummated at a very near date, according to Jenkins's report. If there were rebellion and envy over this expected result in many phases of masculine feeling present, there was also relief in near approach to the embittered hearts of less fair rivals. For the few to envy her the handsome young Marylander at her side, there were the many to rejoice at returning allegiance of wavering lovers when convinced of the hopelessness of their later aspirations. It is in no more than ordinary ratio that one acknowledged belle will covet the final conquest of another where a dozen will rejoice over the conquest which removes a formidable rival. Ethel Richland was sure to marry sooner or later from the upper stratum, so as well Erle Hetherville as any other, and the sooner the tender folly of six years standing was merged into the realistic effect of the matrimonial venture, the better chance for those remaining.

Erle himself had come out from that interview in the library with a set resolve at his heart that she should never know how nearly faithless he had proved to her—how his heart was turning at that moment away from her fair bodily presence, from the sweet, still expression her face wore to another face, small, pathetic, wistful, which had grown dearer to him in this short time past than any other one on earth. Ethel had put away the temptation which he had fancied would prove as powerful with her. Nothing remained for him but to accept the renewed offering of her love and faith, nothing but to bring his own allegiance back, if that might be, to the old contented standard.

"And though dear little Wilma may care for me," he thought, with a thrill of pain shaking him—"does, I know, her sense of duty and right will never let her waver. Her own heart would break before she would permit the slightest distress to Ethel. Oh, Wilma, Wilma! my darling—my darling for the last time! The hardest will be to tear out loving thoughts of you, as I must do now."

The musical interlude was brief. The curtain went up on the second act almost before they were fairly seated. Erle's eyes swept the stage, went carelessly over the house and came back to rest upon his companion. Of all the fair young creatures there—and there were many—not one could favorably compare with her. Not one of all those the brilliant blaze of lights shone down upon who might have drawn him from her with one extra thrill of admiration. It would not seem any impossible matter to go wild with love of so fair a face, but there was no enthusiasm, no warmth of thankfulness present with Erle.

She glanced up to meet his steady, earnest eyes, and smiled in return—a glance and a smile which were noted by an occupant of an opposite box. It held two gentlemen, one whose attention was fixed steadily upon the scene acting before him; the other, apparently indifferent to the stage spectacle, had been among those to bow to the late arrival, and whose careless observation had not wavered from them since. It was the reporter, Crayton.

"Going as I predicted," he thought, gloomily. "They are actually becoming reconciled at this early day; that is, as nearly reconciled as they will be for a time. They will follow the usual routine, and find a complacent sort of enjoyment in it, no doubt, when the honeymoon is once over. He will be rather fond of his peerlessly fair bride, in spite of the dark-eyed little elf who, according to all the laws of contrast, was such a powerful attraction to him, notwithstanding my own intuition of the meaning of that *tele-a-tete* so well covered by Minerva's shadow in the Richland drawing-room—a *tele-a-tete* which his intense expression and the little one's pallor and

agitated stillness afterward invested with a hint of more than ordinary chit-chat. For all that, he will be proud of the fair mistress he will take to Hetherlands; he will share his best affections between her and his dogs and his horses and the thousand and one interests which are inbred associations with him. And she will have her hosts of admirers still here and there, and wherever her dainty presence goes, and will find in the excitement of her free fashionable life whatever may be lacking at home. It will not be either the best or the happiest lot which might be hers; it is not the one I would choose for her with the purest wish I may be capable of turning for her happiness. Lord knows, my best hope is for that. I would give the best or the worst that is left of me to turn sorrow of any kind from her, and yet who is to know where this enterprise of mine is taking me? Who knows what it may be threatening her through them? Nothing good, nothing hopeful, nothing which can well bear the light, or that old fox of a Bitter-Herbs would not be upon the trail. It's no principle of mine to go back when I have started once, and I'll not go back in this. Fair and still and cold and statue-like in her unbroken repose of expression is Mrs. Richland tonight. I wonder if nothing can change the statue. I wonder if the striking similarity Lenoir and myself found in the pictured Rose who has been dead and buried for seventeen years, will make any greater impression upon my new friend and lavish companion of the evening than a reference to it had upon her. Ah, she glances this way! The play is a tiresome affair, and the curtain goes down again with little encouragement in the way of applause, and now is the time."

He touched his companion upon the shoulder. The latter, who had been sitting half in shadow, looking around, nodded approvingly.

"Upon my word, it is proving rather a novel sensation to find myself in such a place again. I see you are smiling over my absorption in the drama, but it is years since I have been in a theater, remember."

"We have other sights here better worth the seeing, to my mind, Captain Bernham. What have you to say for all the dazzle represented here in the way of diamonds and bright eyes, exquisite costumes and fair faces? There is one, two I might say, opposite now. The Richland box, that is, holding the two most famed beauties our twin-cities boast, madame herself and the younger, her sister-in-law—the sweetest, most bewildering and heart-breaking of all the fair ones gathered here."

"You take me out of my depth when you speak of fair faces. The Richlands, you say? That name has a familiar sound—pray, where?" He leaned forward into the light. His tall head, his bronzed, bearded face, his straight, stalwart, soldierly form, cut in relief against the drapery at his side. Suddenly his face paled beneath the bronze. A tremor passed over the firm lips shaded by the heavy military mustache. His hand dropped upon Crayton's arm, closed in a crushing grip that made the latter wince with pain. His eyes, dilated, were fixed in unwavering intensity; the whole scene of dazzling brightness, the human sea around, the gallery, the pit, the stage, all were blotted into an unmeaning blank, out of which one face looked forward into his own.

Mrs. Richland, leaning back, the ruby silk lighting with richest effect, her snow-white opera cloak fallen back, diamonds at her throat and on her round white arms, formed a picture well calculated to impress a stranger at first sight. The perfect colorless oval of her face turned into full view, the fine jetty hair dressed high in puffs and braids, the long lashes that had been downcast raising to disclose the wonderful soft dark eyes beneath—that was the sight which fascinated Captain Leigh Bernham's gaze. For one second the dark, fathomless eyes had looked into his; in that one second she had seen the intense eagerness, amazement and incredulity, the powerful agitation reflected in his face; then the long lashes dropped and a mist of cobwebby lace-and-cambrie was swept across the lady's lips, held there for a second and dropped, but the dark eyes did not again glance that way.

"My dear, Bernham, what the dickens may the matter be? I say, captain, you are drawing the notice of the whole house, or a good portion of it, and have succeeded in staring a lady completely out of countenance. Suppose you should look somewhere else for a moment, or throw a little less of dramatic intensity into your gaze. There's a wonderful resemblance, I grant, to that painted face of your miniature as we remarked, if you take the pains to remember, but, since the original of that is dead and buried these seventeen years past, of course there can be no question of any relative connection between the two."

Captain Bernham breathed a deep inspiration and drew back to his former position.

"Who did you say that lady is?" he asked, in a low, level voice. "You are right—the resemblance is striking, startling."

"That is Mrs. Richland, one of our first leaders of the first circle, the envied of all envying; the courted, flattered, eulogized wife of the richest banker whose plate-glass front decorates the avenue. That is her husband beside her, the acknowledged most fortunate man, as his wife and sister are the acknowledged most beautiful women in our two cities. They say he never made an unlucky venture in his life, and to be witness to his prosperity would go to show it. Such men usually make a failure in a suitably equalized choice matrimonial, but his is an exceptional case. They have been married for fifteen years—that long ago one might fancy Mrs. Richland would be more than ever the image of the 'Rose' dead and buried even then—and after fifteen years of that familiarity in the

close relation which very often breeds complete indifference they are lover-like and devoted as during the honeymoon. See him now—no, don't look while you are blanched out to that ghostly shade, you positively would make a good personation of the Spirit Avenger in that shape.

Captain Leigh Bernham had looked, however. Had seen the tender solicitude with which Mr. Richland was treating his wife, saw the anxiety come up into the smooth, florid face, the slight stir in the box, one or two leave neighboring places and make their way there. Crayton went among them. He came back after a couple of minutes. Mrs. Richland had been overpowered by the heat, some one had brought her a glass of water and she was quite recovered from her sudden faintness. That formed the body of the observation Crayton had it on his tongue to utter as he went back to his place, but he found no occasion for speaking the words. He found the shadowed seat vacated, Captain Leigh Bernham incontinently deserted.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOCTOR'S ANSWER.

WILMA heard with a deathlike faintness rushing over her.

"Suppose I tell you that your unknown mother is your benefactress of to-day, Mrs. Richland." The words, spoken with not a trace of sentiment or emotion, repeated themselves over and again in her mind. A wave of awe, of pity, of dread chilled and held her still. The doctor's light, stealthy, coldly triumphant eyes, the doctor's sallow, impassive countenance were cruelly forbidding in their unchanging expression. Even the doctor's phlegmatic nature was not proof against the startled, terrified apprehension in the deepening, darkening eyes. Eyes just then, notwithstanding the entire difference of expression, wonderfully like the soft, dark, steady ones which had looked the doctor out of countenance before this.

"Not the only feature she has taken from her mother," thought the doctor in the interval of silence which fell. "The oval of the face is the same, the same cut about the lips and chin, but there the resemblance ceases and is altogether so indefinite it is not wonderful that none of them have ever detected it; and all the rest is a very fac-simile in a little more delicate cast of the miniature which Captain Bernham so kindly left me."

The curved fine lips he watched trembled apart, the pained, wistful eyes were drawn away from him, and, in the bewildered way of one waking from a stupor, Wilma murmured:

"It is impossible! That could never be even if my mother lived. That could not be."

But even then in her quivering, agitated soul had come the conviction that his words were true. Even then she understood as she never had done before what was that strange fascinating influence which the lady's presence never failed to exert over her—a strangely fascinating influence, so mingled with a contrasting, almost repellent sensation at times when those inscrutable dark eyes had looked upon her; as they had once or twice, with an expression which had half-terrified her then, a sensation like that thrill which Mr. Richland's touch had once sent over her, such an uncomfortable, undefined feeling that she could not conquer—it came to her that it might mean the depth of sympathy between parent and child, poisoned by that curse which Matthew Gregory asserted was hers before she ever came into life at all, that which must make her an object of dread and aversion to any one upon whom she might find a claim, such a claim as this she knew now his meaning must have been.

"It is a fact rather calculated to take you by surprise at first, one so strange as to well seem incredible I can readily understand. A fact which I am inclined to think might even give Mrs. Richland herself a shock of surprise and incredulity at first. But it is a truth for all that, a truth which, as I said before, may be turned to your advantage in a way to insure your permanent welfare, to give you a station and a name equal to theirs, even the power to avert the worst of what might be brought home to her, and which could very materially alter her envied and enviable position of the present. Take it all into calm consideration, Wilma. Remember that a favorable answer to my suit will insure all that to you, and the best that can be made of a bad affair to her. There was an old idiosyncrasy which used to run in your former guardian's mind, which took the form of a monotonous chant in some of his flighty moments, and the burden of it was always 'a dead life, a dead life.' You have heard something

of the sort, no doubt. Did he ever tell you whose was that dead life?"

"He told me once," said Wilma, her great solemn eyes looking their wonder and awe and dread upon him again, "that mine was a dead life, and told me to pray that I might never be the cause of a living death. I never knew what he meant by it; I pray Heaven that I never shall know."

"Upon my word, you are an exception to the rule of your sex, Wilma. With that much mystery to have fed upon, few of womankind would hold back at the chance of piercing their own hidden histories; fewer still would care to resist the allurements of such accompanying fortune as I have hinted at. Yes, yours has been a dead life; you have been dead to your proper identity from the hour of your birth, dead to those who are accountable for your existence for as long a time. And yours is by far too sweet and useful a life to remain so—by far too fair a prospect as it may be made to let an inexperienced girl's sentimental fancy mar the wonderful results which may be brought out of it."

"But I do not understand," said Wilma. "I can not understand how it is possible Mrs. Richland

should be my mother—how it can be that I should be lost to my mother and every one, as you say."

"Both matters which I might not find it expedient to explain to you now. There is another part of the affair with which you require to be familiarized at first—the importance of letting me be your guide from this time out, and the result which a refusal on your part may mean in effect. You can reap no benefit except through me. You may, through the truths I can bring to light, send your mother disgraced out from her home here, take away her right to the Richland name, send her out to such misery, such humiliation as one might readily fancy would prove a death in life to her proud and stubborn heart. That was my old friend Gregory's meaning without a doubt. He knew what the fair, proud, courted Mrs. Richland may not know to this very day—that when she married her present husband she had another husband in the land of the living. A husband and a child by one of those romantic early marriages which bring so many young fools to grief; and she not suspecting the existence of either; by my soul, little wonder if it should come as a shock to the madame of to-day. I really incline in my heart to spare it to her, but that part must remain with your decision. You know something of what the Richland pride is, my dear; you know how it would be stung to the quick by any such revelation as this which I have traced for you, not in its darkest or most hopeless aspect at that. I have told you what my affection for you is, Wilma. You will find it more lasting, more truly devoted to your best welfare, more trustworthy than the professions of some younger and more impulsive men might have proved, perhaps. A certain friend of mine, who is not wholly without an interest in you, gave me a hint of the danger you are in, which has rather precipitated this avowal of mine. No need to be secret on that score. It was that odd genius, Crayton, a sharp and observant young fellow, by the way, who for once has succeeded in putting those qualities to account. He called on me at the old place to-day, and while there I chanced to refer to my guardianship of you. He was surprised, and let me know it in the rather assured and not always agreeable manner these wild Bohemians pick up.

"A deuce of a guardian you are, then," he said, with rather more emphasis than elegance. "You ought to be ashamed of owning the trust, I say. That little Wilma Wilde is too trusting and tender a blossom, according to my idea, to be exposed to the rough chance that's before her now. There are girls who wouldn't be in any way hurt by it; in fact, such things go in the common experience that makes our Girl of the Period, I believe, but that child would break her tender little heart over a case of wilful deception which is simply flirtation to the generality of our sort."

"Very naturally I was at a loss, and begged him to explain what danger could possibly menace you."

"The danger of throwing her into daily companionship with that already as good as married male flirt, Hetherville," was the reply. "I'll wager you a XX. she don't even know of his engagement whole ages ago to the Richland beauty; or if she does know that, he has insinuated in the strongest terms his intention of breaking from that long betrothal for sake of her—poor little innocent! He'll not break anything except her heart, take my word for it. If I were her guardian, and had no particular interest in an untimely death or something of that sort, I'd make it a point to set her straight regarding the handsome young villain."

"You may fancy what a start that hint gave me, Wilma. I seemed to see not simply my hopes shattered and your future devastated, but a new complication to make worse this pitiful Richland relation. Suppose if it were less serious to you, more serious to him, if the daughter of Mr. Richland's supposed wife won the lover of Mr. Richland's sister to a forgetfulness of the faith which was due from him, there would be the double blow to the Richland pride. Suppose it should be, as Crayton said, if a handsome, heartless young scamp had brought a misery into your life from which you might never fully recover. It pointed out my own course too clearly for me to mistake it, Wilma. My first duty is to you, and my heart is all engaged in that duty. I don't even press the question if there were truth in our reporter's apt surmise; I only ask you to trust to my affection, to the love which will be the more steadfast for being matured, to the judgment which has shown me how you will wish to spare any pain to them. Your answer, Wilma, here and now."

What a contrast to be put vividly before her in asking a choice! Erle Hetherville, having youth and manliness and honor and earnestness all on his side; and this man, crafty, hypocritical, selfish, as her pure mind warned her; more than that, designing and subtly treacherous—what a pitiful, meager chance for Dr. Craven Dallas had he based his hopes upon the impulse she would derive from that contrast.

What a bitter, bitter choice for Wilma, with her young and lately sorely wounded heart to even contemplate then a duty leading her to any relation with that man. His thin, sallow face, and cold, calculating eyes gone back to their shifting habit and furtive scrutiny, his narrow, retreating forehead with the scant sandy hair far back at the temples, the whole man repellent and insincere to her glance, no wonder Wilma shrank and shivered and put her hands up over her eyes to shut away the sight of him.

He waited, leaving her the silence which would enable her to take a full comprehension of all he had been saying, and of the inevitable misery which would result from a further betrayal of his knowledge. The two who had extended their bounty so generously to her, not suspecting what she was to

"Some one from below, I daresay," Miss Erie mused during the moment Dorothy was gone. "I

wonder if I am growing nervous. It really gave me a start, thinking for the second that it looked like—absolutely, like Wilma."

She glanced up at the opening door and sat transfixed at seeing, absolutely, Wilma.

She threw back the veil and came forward quickly, with her anxious, timid eyes fixed pleadingly upon the elder lady's countenance.

"I never will give my sanction, if she has come for that; I never will approve of Erle's course in this," was the hardening thought which flashed through Miss Erle's mind as she gave a gesture of dismissal to the maid. The latter went out, and Wilma put forth both her hands, her face eloquent with entreaty.

"Oh, dear, dear Miss Erle," she said. "Won't you befriend me—won't you advise me, help me? There is not one in the wide world to whom I can turn unless to you."

Stiff and still sat Miss Erle, very sternly looked forward into the sweet, wistful, pleading face. The face, she thought, which had led her nephew away from his true allegiance, that had drawn him out of the strictly honorable course from which one of his race should never deviate. That look and the lack of all other response was a sudden chill to Wilma's hope. She stood with a sense of dreary desolation come upon her, the expectation faded from her face, the old weary hopelessness settled there and at her heart.

"I beg your pardon," she said, quietly. "I never should have come here but for your kind solicitation a few days ago. May I ask of you only this, that you will not mention my having been here?"

Miss Erle, brought back to herself, put out her hand and spoke not unkindly.

"You gave me such a surprise, Wilma, and—I may as well say it first as last—I received such a shock and disappointment through you very recently. A sense of the two came so strongly over me just then that I quite forgot myself, though I don't lay any intentional agency to you."

"A disappointment, Miss Erle? Oh, I hope and I think it may not be as you suppose. You are mistaken, I am sure, if you thought the disappointment was to come through Mr. Hetherville."

"Do you know what Erle told me before he left here yesterday, Wilma? That because of his liking for you he meant to break with Ethel; that after discovering his change of mind he would do so if he could not even have the assurance of finding a response in you. You mean, I presume, that you have not seen him and do not know how set in his purpose he has become."

"I mean, dear Miss Erle, that there is no fear of any estrangement coming between them. If there was a difference, rest assured it has been safely passed. They have passed all misunderstanding, and have decided that the wedding shall be on New Year's Day. I am glad I can tell you so beyond a doubt."

Miss Erle's face lighted with something very like joyful incredulity, a perceptible change of warmth in her manner. She could not well understand how this happy result had come about. Erle had appeared very decided, and though indolence might be a prevailing characteristic of his, lack of determination certainly was not. If he had compromised with himself and again acknowledged fidelity to Ethel, it was no half-way compromise to be broken through with any succeeding change or discontent, she was very sure.

"You have lightened my heart of a heavy load, Wilma," she said, with affectionate kindness. "Come here my child, and let me tell you how really well come you are. I am truly very fond of you, Wilma, though you may have been led to doubt it just now. There is nothing short of my hope and pride in Erle to which I would not willingly admit you. I felt every word when I told you how glad I would be to secure you as a young companion; if any change has occurred to have sent you here for that purpose, my dear, I am ready to prove the sincerity of my offer."

"A great change has occurred, Miss Erle. One which I can not explain fully, but I have discovered that by remaining there I was liable to bring sorrow and distress upon those who have been so kind to me and whom I so dearly love. I came away without their knowledge, and I know they will be grieved at what will seem such ungrateful conduct from me, but my most urgent wish is to leave them in ignorance of my whereabouts. I want to go where there is no chance of their tracing me. It is my duty, Miss Erle, to lose myself to them, and I came to you because I am myself so inexperienced."

"Whatever cause has sent you, dear child, you shall not leave me while you are free to remain. No, not a word. I need you and I shall keep you. Never mind what reason sent you here, I am rejoiced at your coming. Sit here and breakfast with me and let me tell you what additional cause I have for worshipping just now."

Miss Erle's own private conclusion, hastily arrived at, was that Wilma's influence had persuaded Erle to a continuance of his duty, and that Wilma's secret reason for leaving was to avoid the chance of her presence swerving him from the right again.

"All for the best, no doubt," thought Miss Erle, "but there is no fear of Erle if he has made his decision firmly."

"There is no place you could well be safer than here, my dear," she said, confidently. "There is work ready to your hand, too, of a kind to call out your sympathy and bring that delicate tact of yours into play. There is a sickness broken out among my poor people here, a fever, but I think we of strong bodily health and good constitutions need have no cause for apprehension. These foolish people! they have no regard for sanitary measures. They live in a style to induce disease to breed among

them; they have no care and no forethought, and very often they will not profit by better wisdom and kindly intention. Don't imagine, my dear, that I wish to press you to unwilling service, or that I am anxious you should engage in it at all. I would not urge any one to exposure, and what chance of contagion there may be. I shall as gladly make you welcome here and keep you exclusively to myself in my own home."

"Indeed, I shall be glad to be of use, and I am not afraid of the infection," Wilma declared.

Dear little Wilma! Life was so dreary to her just then, such a hopeless, despairing outlook, that to lay it down in a brave performance of duty and kindness to that humanity to which she was indebted for so little would have seemed no appalling prospect.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DOCTOR'S ADVANTAGE.

MR. RICHLAND, with his back to the fire, the gold watch wound and replaced in his pocket, waited with exemplary patience for minutes past the usual breakfast time that morning. Much given as he was of late to his own complacent musings the delay was proving a source of annoyance to this model man of exactly regulated habits. He shifted uneasily, and glanced up at the marble clock, and growled a mild expletive in a gruff voice far down in his chest, and waited again, but the light broke through the clouds in a moment as with a soft sweep of trailing robe, a breath of faint fragrance, a fair face sweet and bright, Ethel made her appearance.

"I am unpardonably late I know," she said from the doorway, "and—Is it possible that Gertrude is not down yet? Indeed, in that case, I will not plead any excuse."

"It is unprecedented, this delay on the part of Gertrude. Really, Ethel, I am quite apprehensive over it. Here, William, send some one up to see what may be detaining Mrs. Richland. I am apprehensive that Gertrude is not so perfectly well as always heretofore. Her slight indisposition of last evening may have been the precursor of something more serious; I thought she looked uncommonly weary and affected with lassitude after our return, though she would have it that she was not even fatigued."

His growing uneasiness was set at rest on that score as Mrs. Richland made her appearance a moment later. She was her usual self; that clear, still face never changed even to those who loved her best and were with her most. Looking into its perfect statuesque repose one could ill imagine any hidden inner emotion, great throes and spasms like the convulsions of those inner fires which burn silently for centuries, and break out to mar fair, unsuspecting earth with some little loosening of the power which holds them. She came in with an open letter in her hand, a sheet of note paper written over in a straggling, broken, uncertain hand, growing firmer at the last, and with the dry blistering of tears upon it. She went close to her husband, no way changed, and yet her face had gone down upon that little sheet twenty minutes before, drawn, hardened, every line strained and tense, her heart a dead, numb agony worse to bear than keen, fierce pain.

"Dearest friend of all I have ever known," ran the note, "do not think me ungrateful for all your great kindnesses. I never can tell half how thankful I am and have been; if I never should see any of you again I should never fail to carry loving remembrances of all. I have been very happy here, but it is my duty to go away—a duty I owe to you. Please do not try to discover me; do believe that I am not ungrateful as this must seem, and that I will be happier in being only kindly remembered than if you are distressed at my going, or make an attempt to find me. I shall go to a friend who I am sure will help and advise me for the best, and I shall never cease to pray for you and your perfect happiness, for dear Miss Ethel and for Mr. Richland—all! Heaven bless you all!"

WILMA.

That was what Mr. Richland read, and looked into his wife's eyes, perplexed and disconcerted.

"Upon my word, Gertrude! Most extraordinary! What is this the child has been doing? Never—surely never so foolishly precipitate as to have gone away?"

"She is certainly gone, Howard. I sent Cicely to her room to call her to me and she found only that."

"Wilma gone!" echoed Ethel. "Why should she go? Why in such a manner?"

"And just as we had all grown fond of her," added Mr. Richland, in aggrieved tones. "I presume it is no more than we might have expected; it always is the way, but I own to being disappointed. I would not have thought it of Wilma."

"Don't think hardly of the child now, Howard. I feel confident that some reason which she has not hinted must have persuaded her that this step is for the best for us and her. She is so inexperienced, so apt to be impressed very deeply by what would seem a small matter to us. I do not fear much difficulty in explaining any such fancied trouble away. Of course she must have gone back to her guardian."

William Thompson, entering, caught the last words.

"I think, ma'am," bowing profoundly, "if I may be allowed to say it, if it's Miss Wilma, which Cicely have told me just now is found missing, I think as how she couldn't have gone to that doctor what calls himself her guardian. The doctor were here at a very improper time, if I may be allowed to remark it, seeing as how he knew the family were out, and Miss Wilma were in no ways glad to have him as I could see, and she, poor, dear young lady! looking sad and stunned like to touch a heart of stone. I thought more of it after, when I'd gone back to wait by the fire again, and could see her face coming up in the coals looking so. And the doctor was saving

something as I answered the bell to show him out, of coming to-day to find her ready, and Miss Wilma saying not so much as a word to answer him. I'd sooner think she'd care to go away from him any day than to go to him, for if ever I see dread on a human face it were on hers then."

However much William Thompson had positively seen, and how much had awakened in his mind since the news spread, his deduction was not far incorrect, and gave a new, startled thought to one present.

"If Dr. Dallas is exerting his influence, it means no good to either her or me. And, Wilma, Wilma! if yours should be but the first example of two!"

No trace of the thought reflected itself, as her husband questioned the servant sharply.

"When was this person here, William, Dr. Dallas, I mean? I doubt if he is a man I would care to admit to the house. I have heard of him through Crayton, my dear; a charlatan, a dabbler in pharmacy and chemistry, and a sycophant who hovers about better men until he gets a hold to push himself upon their footing. Very unfortunate that Wilma should have been left to the charge of such a person. Last evening after we left for the theater, you say, William, and remained for an hour? I think there is scarcely a doubt but he has had something to do with this freak of your little protegee, Gertrude."

"I was present when Dr. Dallas stipulated that he should still be permitted free communication with his ward, and considered his trust in no way yielded through allowing her to come to us," remarked Ethel. "I formed an unfavorable impression of the man, but do not think he could have any object in persuading her to leave us in a manner like this."

"Of course we must not lose time in tracing her whereabouts, whether she has or has not returned to him. The first thing will be to send to the residence of this Dr. Dallas, I presume. Can some one be spared from the household for that, Gertrude?"

"I have been thinking," she answered slowly, "whatever Wilma's reason may be, I am sure it is one which seems sufficient to her. I would not advise anything public or calculated to disturb her in any refuge she may have taken. Make quiet inquiry and wait in hope that she may either return or communicate some further assurance of her safety. I am sure Wilma meant every word that she has written here; I am sure if it seems right to her, she will come back of her own accord. I think that we may all trust to her realization of what is right, Howard."

"Upon my word, Gertrude. 'Any refuge she may have taken; but why should she take refuge from us? Why shouldn't she trust in us if any trouble of her own has overtaken her? I would scarcely have been more surprised if Ethel here had taken such a wild freak into her mind. I am more than grieved, disappointed at her lack of confidence in us, and after our meaning to receive her in Ethel's place in the household, to be vacant so soon. No one ever could take your place in our hearts, little sister, but Wilma had won a very tender place in mine for herself. I repeat I am inexpressibly disappointed."

In his perplexed annoyance Mr. Richland failed to see that whatever influence had persuaded her, had some way found a hold through themselves. Wilma's duty to them had affected her action, and Gertrude, looking down into the glowing coals, saw further and more than the others could even suspect.

"Whatever Wilma's prompting, I believe it is for the best," she was thinking. "She is brave, self-denying, heroic; but this affair of Erle and Ethel may have proved too great a trial. She may have found herself lacking force of nerve to keep down her own pain with the presence of both such constant reminders. I feel—is it only a fancy?—I feel if we had her here now, if she had not gone like this, if we should find her at once even, that it would be to lose her completely forever. She is his child—his—and I cling to her so it would be death to give her up now. Oh, merciful Heaven! what end to the web? I can only pray with her that no shadow may fall to cloud the happiness of these dear ones."

"Well, Gertrude," her husband interrupted her silent reflection, "what is to be done? Cause the bells to ring and the tidings to go forth, or wait as you say the simple issue of events? One will inflict publicity and annoyance, and the other appears to me heartless, wrong. I should feel almost implicated now if any harm came to the rash girl."

"Could we not make inquiry and trace her quietly, in such a manner she should not suspect we were making the attempt? You mentioned Crayton, and I fancy he would be a good person to consult with. For to-day do nothing, at least until I have acted upon your suggestion and sent to her guardian."

Meanwhile breakfast had grown cold. Mrs. Richland rung for fresh coffee, and they sat down, a depressed party, all feeling the absence of the trim little figure, of the sweet, dark, small face with the soft hair clinging lovingly about the temples, and rippling down about the slender throat—a shape and a face which had grown dear to each of them in these few weeks past.

There proved no necessity for any messenger to be sent to the old house on the Manchester road that day.

Mr. Richland had gone to the bank; Ethel, pale and perturbed, all her own new sense of relief and approval of her own course growing more easy before her suddenly shaken by this unaccountable loss of Wilma, had taken the advice of her brother's wife and kept an engagement she had made, to drive with Mrs. Latham, whose grand reception of a little more than a week ago had opened the gay season. Outwardly the entire household moved on the same; yet scarcely one within the fair, wide walls but felt, in greater or less degree, the shock and the depres-

sion which had fallen with greatest force on the one who made least display of her emotions—Mrs. Richland.

The news, spread over the house through Cicely's agency, had created an under-buzz of excitement, kept down by means of the unchanged surface.

"It's that Dr. Craving Dallas's doings, depend on it," asserted William Thompson, stoutly. "If ever villainy and cat-cunning were set in human countenance, there are hisn. Our Miss Wilma is too sweet and trusting to be left to that human vulture's clutches, as I always will maintain— Bless my life! It's only the door-bell, but what a start it did give me."

Out short in his dissertation, William Thompson hurried to the performance of his duty, and a moment later admitted the chief object of it—Dr. Craven Dallas himself.

"Which I was never so took aback," said the irrepressible William, in a snatched side-conference with the housekeeper, on the way of transmitting his message—"I never was, as when he ups and asks for Miss Wilma, with his compliments to Mrs. Richland, and will she see him for a moment alone, while he waits for his ward? And what does he but walks off, not into the drawing-room at all, as I was thinking of asking him to take a hall chair, but like a lord at home, straight into the library. Let your mistress know I am waiting here," says he, lofty as you please, with his yellow eyes shut down and looking on all sides of him as though he'd like to put the whole establishment into his pocket, and walk off with that same. It's a blessing that our Mrs. Richland is of a sort to put him down to his proper level."

Mrs. Richland was before her dressing-glass, completing a hasty toilet of plain outdoor wear, when the message reached her. She turned to her maid, who was laying out mantle and gloves and veil for her, secretly wondering at the whim which was taking her mistress walking in that unassuming guise.

"You may put them back, Cicely. This interruption changes my mind. I will not go out at all this morning, I think."

She went down as she was, the plain dark garments sweeping about her stately form, ease and grace in every quiet motion, the steady, unreadable eyes looking forward into the face of this early visitor as the door unclosed and left her standing before him. With an inclination of the head and a gesture of recognition, she stood silently awaiting his speech.

"Pon honor, very much as a queen might do with no very well-favored subject," thought the doctor, "and I can very well imagine, my high-toned madame, secure in the assurance of your own insolent superiority though you may be, that the sight of the one-time needy young physician should be no very agreeable one to you—by no means a person with whom you might desire to be thrown into continued juxtaposition which might overrule fancied forgetfulness."

He bowed profoundly before the coldly-silent presence.

"I trust sincerely I do not intrude upon prior arrangements," he said, blandly deprecating. The doctor always deprecated intrusions on his own part with a sort of Uriah Heep humbleness, which proved particularly offensive to his present listener. "Favor me by being seated, madame; there will be no need to delay my subject. Grieved as I must be to insist upon any change which may not tally with your wishes and most generous intentions, I have still a duty to perform that shall be faithfully executed to the furthest of my poor ability. My ward, I presume, has not left you in ignorance of a decision I was forced to impart to her during an interview last evening."

"Wilma has told me nothing, Dr. Dallas," Mrs. Richland was non-committal regarding the cause of such reserve, waiting to conclude how far he might be concerned in this step of Wilma's.

"Ah, that makes my task the harder! I find it necessary, absolutely a moral necessity, to resume my active duties as Wilma's guardian, to request her immediate return under my own personal observation, to my own individual care. I have already apprised my ward of the facts of the case. My housekeeper, who is extremely fond of the young lady, and who has done little but make regret over our temporary loss of her, has put her old room into its previous order, and I am come prepared to accompany Wilma back to her home which will never cease to be freely hers. Will you kindly permit her to be informed that I am here for the purpose?"

"First, will you explain to me what cause necessitates this sudden change? Accept my warm interest in your ward as apology for asking."

"Family reasons entirely, Mrs. Richland," he answered, with apparent carelessness, but with his light, furtive eyes scanning her closely. "The assurance of advantage to be derived from Wilma through—as yet—an unacknowledged connection. I am sure you will rejoice to know that Wilma, presumed alone in the world, has one living relative very favorably situated in the scale of earthly possessions and honors from whom she may unquestionably expect to reap some very tolerable benefit."

"And this relative," queried the lady, "is reconciled to her existence, prepared to acknowledge and receive her?"

"I have every reason to believe, madam, that this relative does not even suspect the girl's existence. I have my own private opinion at heart that the knowledge will be a matter of any thing but rejoicing to the person most nearly concerned by it. But of that, what? Certainly nothing with imperative duty in the other scale."

"That with Dr. Dallas means what sum? I think I understand your motive, sir, and am sufficiently interested to submit to any fair demand rather than

part with Wilma. It is our wish—Mr. Richland's and mine—to adopt Wilma into our household; to receive her and cherish her and be assured of her as though she really were one of us. Every man has his price, Dr. Dallas; let me ask again plainly what is yours?"

"How the maternal heart, all unsuspecting, responds to nature's thrill," was the doctor's sarcastic thought. "And how our fine lady's worldly wisdom reaches to the root of affairs! If better calculations fail, my dear Madame Richland, I may even tote a considerable price out of you, but not yet—not yet."

"My dearest lady," he exclaimed, with a plaintive intonation of reproach and of that offensive touch of deprecation combined, "must I assure you that my interest in Wilma has been without money and is without price? It is so, I assure you. For the sake of the child's welfare I shall not neglect one precaution in making her claim good; my own reward will be found in witnessing her prosperity. We could not wish it to one more deserving. May I trouble you—I am in some haste this morning—again to summon Wilma to attend me? Your pardon for having detained you, Mrs. Richland."

"It is unfortunately impossible to comply," answered Mrs. Richland, quietly. "You may understand better than we what reason Wilma had for her action, Dr. Dallas. She left us unknown to any one, some time during the night or early morning. Her room was found vacant, her bed unslept in, Wilma gone."

The doctor's jaw dropped. His eyes opened wide for once and returned her fixed gaze with such a scintillation of angry, cruel green lights that her heart sickened, nothing disturbed though her outward composure remained.

"Wilma gone—Wilma gone!" he repeated. Then, with a sudden, tigerish fierceness, and a blinding suspicion rushing across him, breaking the smooth mask of craft and oily subterfuge—"Are you instrumental in that, Mrs. Richland? If you have undertaken any such underhand game, by the Lord! you have chosen the wrong man to play it with."

Her steady, calm and scornful eyes gave him an assurance of how hasty his conclusion had been, but it was an effective declaration of war between them he was in nowise inclined to retract.

"You forget yourself, sir," she answered, coldly. "There need be little more said until Wilma is found again; but, meantime, I refer you to Mr. Richland's solicitor in the hope of reaching some definite agreement regarding the end we should be happy to effect. I have the pleasure of wishing you good-morning, sir."

"I beg your pardon for detaining you one moment, Mrs. Richland." The doctor had gone back to his usual bland and courteous demeanor, but every word was underlaid with a sarcasm which grated upon her sensitive ear. "Let me hope Wilma may be found very soon. If you had no interest in her disappearance, I shall hope to invest you with one to hasten her recovery—a secret, by the way, which I was favored through her hearing last evening. It is my duty now—how incessant is this stern Duty in her calls upon us!—it is my duty to inform you, Mrs. Richland, after a considerable lapse of time, that the child born in an isolated old house, forty miles out of the city, on a stormy December night seventeen years ago, never died; that that child lives to-day as Wilma Wilde, your own daughter, Mrs. Richland!"

He had meant to give her a sudden shock, and succeeded admirably, though a slow moment of sheer, astonished disappointment elapsed before he was permitted a realization of the fact.

That marble face had wonderful powers of self-command; those deep, inscrutable eyes, so earnestly steady that they abashed even him, were so steeled against surprises that this one was a moment breaking through. There seemed a slow smile of incredulity upon her lips as she put a hand on the arm of a chair—she had stood all this time—wheeled it about and sunk down into it. Not a feature of the marble mask changed, but as if through a deliberate contemplation of the act, Mrs. Richland's stately head rested back against the chair, and then and there under the doctor's very eyes she quietly fainted.

CHAPTER XXII.

EIGHTEEN YEARS BEFORE.

CAPTAIN LEIGH BERNHAM was walking his floor with a rapid, regular stride, that steeled bronzed face telling little, though there was a quiver at times and an unusual paleness hidden under the heavy grizzled mustache, his eyes fixed on the straight space before him, steadfast and inscrutable to a degree which might have rivaled Mrs. Richland's own. Captain Leigh Bernham's strong, contained mind had grasped a refrain which was repeating itself under the disconnected jarring chords of thought that were "less a melody than pain" with him at that hour of that particular morning. That incredible surprise of the previous night was thrilling him with something harder to bear than simple unbelief.

"Never dead and never buried seventeen years ago," sounded that refrain in the captain's mind—"alive, alive!"

And above it—

"Another man's wife—oh, Rose! oh, Rose! Dead to me, and it would be less pain to know that the grass was growing green and flowers blooming over your head—oh, Rose! And she could see me and know me with those cold, unanswering eyes. What did she think of the change, I wonder, and how much of it will she take home to her own proud, unrelenting heart? Whatever my faults and follies then, whatever my long loneliness and my long

mourning since, I always cherished her first and loved her best alone of all the world. I would have been true to her memory forever, and she is alive and another man's wife."

He paused at a turn before a square inclined mirror which reflected back his bronzed face and gloomy, stern eyes and soldierly figure—paused and put up his hand to run it through the close, nut-brown hair, just tinged here and there by silvery threads. The beard, more ruddily brown, with more silver streaks, and the firm mouth, the bronze gathered from long years' exposure to wind and sun and storm, a different face from one which came up at having looked back from his mirror, something more than seventeen years before.

"Little wonder if she had not recognized me," he thought, "but Rose is not one to forget. What was that she said when we spoke of this once? It was when I gave her a picture of myself and got her promise of this one of hers which I have worn through all the years since—foolish, sentimental times those, and to think how I have held to them! I asked her, would she love the giver the same when the face grew old and seamed and the hair silvered, and she said—I remember her very words—she said:

"Through all time and all eternity the very same, Ray"—calling me by that name. 'The dear face itself can never change for me. If any impossible thing should separate us for years and years, and if you should come back to me wrinkled and gray, as you said just now, the eyes of love would not be deceived. I should surely know you and love you all the same, Ray.'

"Any impossible thing! Ah, poor girl! She could have no idea how very soon the most probable expectation I had in view should part us; and I, foolish young fool! had trusted to her love to follow me to the end of the world, if need be. Heaven pity me! my great disappointment in her love found waiting came and was over seventeen years and more ago. I could not hold myself blameless through my too much love for her, and she never forgave me the deception. I pity myself yet as I think of the time when the word came that she was dead. Dead! my little Rose dead! All my faith in Heaven and earth would have been shaken first had any one whispered this—that I should find her living and have sooner known her dead! And yet, poor Rose! not for any temptation in life would I breathe one word to injure you now. But the child—our child—whom you deserted for seventeen years, whose existence I did not even suspect, she is mine; not even you can claim so good a right."

He turned and fell to walking the floor again, a deep corrugation coming into his forehead, a trick of expression which was repeated in Wilma. His thoughts had gone to her, the child of the brief, bright romance of his youthful, foolish days, the little daughter whose existence he had not known until these later days.

"Little Wilma! I know I frightened her, but so near, with her sweet, shy face just discernible through the dusk, I could not resist taking her in my arms and giving her a father's first caress. Poor little thing! at least I shall make her life happier than it was before."

Some one knocked. Captain Bernham paused and gave a brush of his hand over his heavy mustache. Pallor and quiver which had been there changed to the usual close setting of the firmly-chiseled lips.

"Come in," said the captain, and Lenoir answered the invitation.

It was nearly noon of a clear, cool November day. A brisk walk through the bracing air had brought a flush into the young man's cheeks, and an added brightness to his fine dark eyes, yet for all that he was thin and worn even to a casual observer. "It is better to wear out than to rust out," says some wiseacre, and Justin Lenoir seemed to have taken it in hand to verify the maxim in as short a time as the process of wearing out could well be consummated. His was not a vigorous constitution at the best. These long nights of incessant drain upon both mental resources and physical endurance, the hours required by his editorial duties, supplemented by other hours of brain labor lasting habitually into the breaking dawn, and often until the sun was high up and busy traffic begun in the streets—all following this restless American impulse of ours which has no mercy upon health or life or anything except the iron endurance that can stand firm in its own place and be beaten and jostled on all sides, and take no impression from the wear and tear of the multitude about—but it all told upon Lenoir. Possibly his own reflection that the result would be the same, whatever use he made of the time, was in part correct. More than overwork was proving a source of unrest to Justin Lenoir, but who ever knew a restless mind to be put at ease by the extra efforts of a restless body?

"I came immediately upon receipt of your note," Lenoir said, dropping into the seat Bernham placed for him. "My landlady did not disturb me until my usual going out hour. You know the reprehensible habit to which newspaper men are necessarily addicted, of turning night into day, and vice versa, and that must pardon my delay."

"I dare say I took a liberty in addressing you at all, but I trust to your accommodating spirit not to think it such," said the captain, frankly. "Are you at liberty now, Lenoir? Can I claim you for a half-hour or so without interfering with duties of your own?"

"Quite at liberty, and happy to place myself at your service," Lenoir answered.

"And I want to claim a service of you. I think you are acquainted with an influential family here—the Richlands. Yes, I remember you had come from there, the other night, when I met you first. A very short acquaintance it has been to warrant

this offering of my confidence and tax upon your kindness. If you have any delicacy in regard to acting for me, my dear fellow, don't hesitate to say it after I have told you how my case stands. There is a young lady staying with the Richlands—Miss Wilma Wilde. Have you met her?"

"Frequently. I had the liberty of the house through the kindness of its master—of the library more properly—a short time since, and became quite well acquainted with Miss Wilde in my daily comings and goings."

"She is made quite one of the family, then?"

"Yes, and is well worthy the distinction. Such a peculiar, sensitive, childlike, trustful yet pathetic face, I never saw anywhere else, and the face is the clear mirror of a pure soul. They all think and make much of her. An artist friend of mine, Latimer, has done little but rave of her since our last evening there. He wants to paint Wilma as Cinderella, and, as Latimer is apt to have his way in all things, he may hand Wilma down to fame in that guise yet."

The concealed lines about the captain's lips had softened during the first part of the other's speech, only for an instant and then were firm as before.

"Cinderella must have more lasting assurance of more real pleasure," he said, quietly. "You can imagine how gratified I am at hearing you express yourself so favorably, how truly happy I am in announcing myself Wilma's father."

Certainly an abrupt and unexpected announcement. Lenoir looked the surprise it had given him.

"It was a matter of astonishment even to me," the captain continued, answering the look. "It is less than a fortnight since I discovered that I had a daughter, and only yesterday that I traced her whereabouts. Will you smoke and listen to a rough sketch of my story, Lenoir? My pipe has been my solace for so long that it is inseparable as a companion now."

He pushed a case of Havanas across to Lenoir, but took down a beautifully colored meerschaum for himself, filling it leisurely from that heavy silver tobacco-box which had arrested Dr. Craven Dallas's covetous eye.

Lenoir lit his cigar and settled back to listen with unmistakable interest awakened. The captain drew some slow whiffs, watching the misty blue rings curl about his head and drift off in almost imperceptible clouds.

"Something near eighteen years ago," he began, in that same quiet tone he had used, "I was a military student, let free for an interval, with an appointment to a commission and active service under discussion. I was passing the interval in the city here and scouting the country roads in shooting costume and hunting equipments, with very indifferent success. I had the misfortune to bring down some staid old body's pet pigeon one day, and somebody's companion, who was in some way responsible for the bird being beyond the limit of its regular haunts, was in great trepidation over the accident. I can say, after all this time and after seeing women from all parts of the globe, that the companion was the loveliest creature sun ever shone upon; nearer perfection than any thing my impulsive young imagination had ever pictured, or that I have met with in all of my experience. Seeing her shrinking, I volunteered, as was my duty, to explain the affair to whomever it might concern, take all the blame upon myself, where it belonged, and consequently free her from any reproach she may have feared. Her employer turned out to be a very exact old lady with a stern manner, but, I am sure, a kind heart. I managed to come out of the affair, which promised a disturbance, with colors flying and all honors attached."

"That was the beginning, and the end was I married the pretty companion a fortnight after my first meeting with her. I can see what you think, that it was 'marry in haste, to repent at leisure,' but my life with my head clear as it is to-day, with the same run of circumstances to impel, but lacking the knowledge of what was to come after, I should have surely married Rose as then."

"Rose?" spoke Lenoir, quickly. "Then the lovely Rose of your miniature was the one you married, Captain Bernham?"

"That was Rose." There was the slightest disturbed inflection in the captain's tone; it had been a slip of his, mentioning the name at all. "You may wonder less at my infatuation now. I married Rose in secret and under an assumed name. There were family reasons for that. You know where family pride will run sometimes, and I come of one of the stiffest, most overbearing and unreasonable old families that branches over Maryland to-day—a wild, reckless, rash-minded set of men we have been from first to last, I may as well say at once. Of our branch there were left at that time only my brother and myself—my twin brother he was—both worthy representatives of our race gone before, and an old grandfather, who was stiffer and prouder and rasher and more unreasonable than both of us young bloods taken together, and of whom we stood in wholesome awe to his face, at least whatever lawlessness we may have been guilty of behind his back and in defiance of his strict prohibitions. His influence had put us at the military school and insured us our commissions later. In his eyes we were young vandals, both of us, never taken into any very special favoritism, though it was generally understood that one or the other should inherit after him. Some disinterested person once broached his leaving it to us jointly, but he was stiff-necked in his intention. There should be no division of the property; it should go to the one who proved himself most worthy, which meant with my grandfather the one who chanced to be in best favor at the latest moment. Poor old gentleman! He had lived a high life, and near the close of it got a fever for speculation and

barely escaped a pauper's grave at last. But all that was long afterward, and at the time a slight coolness had come up between my brother Ray and myself regarding this very chance of inheritance. The question of who shall be heir has made worse breaches between as close friends, but Ray and I were never what we might have been to each other because of that. We were doing each other the worst of injustice in those days, though we never discovered it until too late to remedy, long years of estrangement lying between. While I was in the city here, galloping over the country roads, or making the best of stolen opportunities with Rose, it was not very well known where my brother was passing his time. Among various reports one had come to me that he was not so far distant as I might suppose, and a whisper came with it that he was keeping a surveillance over my actions, hoping to discover a flaw which might cut short my chances and at the same time advance his own of succeeding our grandfather. It was made plausible by my meeting him in the street one evening, but, before a chance to accost him was given he plunged in a crowd and eluded me, doubtless thinking I would persuade myself I had been mistaken in the recognition. Believing the worst, I set myself to outwit him and hold my own chance equally at least. I married Rose as Raymond Leigh and was guilty of one other piece of deception toward her. I told her nothing of my own uncertain prospects. I permitted her to believe that my release from the military academy was a final release from all accompanying regulations. I did not dare to put before her the probability of barrack life on the frontier as the wife of a petty officer, though I believed firmly she would follow me there when the time came that I should ask it of her. I never believed she would let me go alone when she was once my wife. Hers had been a sad childhood, as she told me the story. She was the only child of a morbid, disappointed man. I learned afterward that his whole life had changed when his young wife—the mother of my Rose—deserted him and her little child for an early lover from whom his own duplicity had served to separate her. He had always seemed to visit the sin of the mother upon the child; he had been harsh and cold to her, and my poor little Rose had come up a lonely, sad-hearted girl, with scarcely a bright spot in her life until an eccentric old lady of the neighborhood saw and took a fancy to her, and succeeded in securing her in the capacity of a young companion."

"We were happy, for a little time, as only young fools can be. Only one little cloud had risen against our bright sky, and that a fleeting one. Rose had driven into the city with her employer, and when I saw her again, taxed me with having passed her unnoticed in the company of a lady, a young girl and very beautiful, she said. I comprehended her mistake in a moment. She had seen my brother—we were very much alike—and at the short distance she had not distinguished the difference. I had never spoken to Rose regarding our family, and I passed over the occurrence without an explanation now. She had no distrust of me and my simple assurance was all that was needed to restore her perfect faith. After that I rented a little place still further out of the city, where Rose and I passed a few such blissfully happy weeks that it is like an exquisite pain now to look back at them. A lingering, delicious time, perfect but for the thrill of one little discord which came through my consciousness of how soon it might all be abruptly ended. The end came, a shock even to me who had been expecting it. I got my commission and orders to join my division at the front in one letter. I went back with it in my pocket, with a cowardly sinking at my heart and a sense of guilt upon me now that there was no help for breaking the truth to Rose."

"She met me—my wife who had parted from me loving so few hours before—frozen like a statue and as hard, but with one burst of fierce reproach greeting me."

"I have discovered all of your deception!" she said, with her eyes flaming in her white face. "I am convinced, and yet I have refused to believe the truth until I have it from your own lips. If you have one word to say in your own self-defense, say it now."

"As she spoke, there moved forward a step from the shadow at her back a shape which I had not seen before, a tall, gaunt old man, from whom Rose shrunk even then and half put out her hand to me. I heard her cry:

"Oh, Ray, Ray! tell me it is not true!" but he stopped her and silenced me when I would have spoken."

"You have grossly deceived and misled my daughter," he said. "For that you are answerable to me. If you have any explanation to make or one extenuation to plead, I am willing to hear you. My daughter goes with me now, and I will meet you—or, better perhaps—you can write me to this address anything you may wish to say." He thrust a card into my hand, but I dropped it and sprang forward, with my hands clutching my wife's mantle detaining her. I only realized that she was leaving me, that I was losing her through my own secrecy and deceit. Something like a flash went over her pale, cold face at the sight of mine, and she stopped, resisting her father's efforts to draw her away."

"It is not true, Ray?" she breathed.

"I could only drop my head in shame, and exclaim, brokenly:

"Forgive me, Rose! I loved you so I dared not risk the chance of losing you." I saw her grow hard and white and cold again. I remember what a wild sweep of despair went over me; that I tried to drag her away forcibly, that I pleaded for myself with all the words I could master, but she would not listen. She put up her hand. The gesture and the blaze of her eyes silenced me."

"I never can forgive you—never!" she said. Then, turning to her father—"Take me away, quick!"

"I fell back, and they were gone in a moment. I was dazed, stricken, incapable of action for what seemed hours. The full sense of my misery came upon me in the middle of darkness, the emptiness of desolation all about in the little house where my dearest happiness had been. The stupor which had been upon me seemed to burst and fall away all in a moment. I staggered to my feet and found a light, and stood looking about at the familiar things, not one of which was not associated with her presence. It dawned upon me in a vague way that it was all unreal, that it was a great mistake which would be cleared away soon; great though my offense had been, Rose never would cast me off for that. I picked up the card from where it had fallen and turned it in my hand. If I could go to her—but there I thought of her gesture, her look of mingled anger and despair and scorn, as she had declared—"I never can forgive you—never!"

"A clock, striking somewhere within sound, warned me. It was almost morning, and I must be off upon my journey before noon. There was no time to see her had I not, coward-like, shrunk from the ordeal. I sat down and scrawled a few hasty lines. I begged her if there had been any mistake, any misunderstanding, any supposition of greater wrong on my part than this deception, which I confessed, that she should come to me there, or send me at least one word of forgiveness or assurance of love. I went out in the breaking dawn and dispatched it by the first messenger I found. No answer came. I grew calmer as I waited, and in my last hour at the house I wrote again, detailing my own fault at length and imploring my wife, if she could pardon the offender for the sake of the motive urging the offense, to join me at a junction by the way. I wrote again when I was really on the way, again and again after I reached my post. I never received one word or token from Rose, but after six months there came a line in an upright, crabbed, unknown hand and signed with her father's name. Rose was dead—dead without forgiving me."

The slight nervous tremor and the pallor had come back to Captain Leigh Bernham's lips. Except that he sat unchanged, upright, bronzed and self-contained, an admirable example of what stern discipline may effect.

"Pardon me," said Lenoir, softly. "I can not think you had cause for much self-reproach however deeply you might sorrow. Your offense was so slight that a woman's true love should have easily covered it."

"I am not sure now that it was so represented to her. Only a week or so ago I came into possession of a little box which had belonged to Rose, one I had given her, and in which she kept the old lover's notes I had smuggled to her. They were there still, and with them my own later letters with unbroken seals. Whether she got them or not it is certain that Rose never read those pleadings and explanations of mine. That is the story, and I don't know now why I should have told it to you. It has scarcely a bearing on what I have to ask of you. No word was sent to me of the little daughter Rose left; I never knew the existence of the child until accident discovered it to me. I can bring forward a witness to declare that Wilma is the child of my dead wife, and I shall surely claim her as mine. I wanted to ask you to break the facts of the case to the Richlands. Can I presume that far on your friendship, Lenoir?"

"For much more than that, I hope, Captain Bernham. In any way I may be able to serve you."

Lenoir answers unhesitatingly though not without an inward twinge. He had meant to keep aloof from Ethel, in thought as well as reality, so far as might be possible. He had thought that he might not see her again, or for no more than the briefest moment of parting when her hand should touch his, her sweet face surrounded by its glory of bright hair look up at him, her voice murmur a simple farewell, meaning little to her, but another cadence added to the song of his life.

The captain emptied the dead ashes from his pipe, turning his face from the other's direct view.

"There is a trifle more. I have a fancy I should like you to witness the offering up of my sacrifice. Some papers concerning this story I have told you, Rose's letters and my own; I don't imagine any Phoenix will rise from their ashes. A little weakness has induced me to keep them this long."

He stirred the coals in the grate until they blazed, then put his hands to an inner breast-pocket of the coat he wore. It stayed there, and Captain Bernham's face really and perceptibly changed at last. It was startled and ghastly in its sudden alarm.

A certain pocket-book to which he had transferred those papers for the purpose of having them always upon his own person, had completely and recently disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOR THREE DAYS.

CRAYTON, tipped back in one of the leather-covered office-chairs, his heels in complacent familiarity with the banker's desk, was listening to the story of Wilma's disappearance, interspersed as it was by the banker's ejaculations of regret and annoyance, by no means grown less after three hours down town.

"Most inexplicable occurrence to my mind and very distressing to all of us," he said, passing his hand over his smooth face and rubbing his soft white palms together, with the aimless motion of mental dissatisfaction. So much prosperity and so little disappointment in all the enterprises of all his smooth, well-regulated life left Howard Richland at a loss in meeting even this departure from the usual way. However Mr. Richland might endure greater

And there the story of Wilma's disappearance was repeated again, and discussed with even more dissatisfaction on the banker's part than before. With no newer conjecture of what motive must have prompted her came the knowledge which promised additional disappointment for themselves, whatever it might portend favorably for Wilma. Mr. Richland would not selfishly have consigned Captain Leigh Bernham and his claim to oblivion if

"Perhaps that very lapse of time may have released me from the obligation of keeping it secret; in fact, I may as well say that it is so. You were the smallest concern in my share of that out-of-the-way

"Mine—my very own—Wilma, mine!" were the words her softened lips whispered to herself, breathlessly, over and over again. "Mine and I never to

know it, not to suspect it when my heart yearned over her to the strain of breaking."

She was invisible still when Mrs. Latham's carriage, rolling past the door, deposited Ethel, but ten minutes later, when her husband returned with Lenoir in his company, her quiet, contained presence was the first to meet them.

If it was less quiet, or less contained, as Lenoir's mission was unvailed, not one there had any perception of it.

"Gertrude's presence always does me good," her husband had said once, in confidence to a friend. "She is calm, with a reliance which an earthquake would not shock. I don't believe in men who require a prop, but I'm proud to declare in my wife as pure stuff as ever shone in a Spartan mother."

That stuff, had Mr. Richland only been aware, shone at its brightest in the half-hour after his return. Wilma claimed by a strange father who had not suspected her existence until less than a fortnight past; Wilma, for whom the father-love and the mother-love had sprung up, and been recognized so very recently—Wilma gone from both; the two separated by such a chilling, dread-inspiring barrier that never in time could they be mutually drawn by the influence which was so powerful with each.

There could be but one aim now as conceded by general acclamation—though had they observed, Mrs. Richland was mute there—Wilma must be found, no method must be left untried, and Lenoir carried with him authority to insert a carefully worded advertisement in each of the leading dailies.

Later, Erle Hetherville came in with set white face and blue eyes stormily ablaze—came in on his fair rancee as it chanced, quite alone.

"What does it mean?" he broke out, with perfect abruptness. "What truth is there in this Crayton has been telling me, that Wilma is gone without provocation and without warning? What has driven that inexperienced child to such a step?"

Ethel wondered at his vehemence, looking up into his stern face.

"We are all very much distressed, Erle. It is true that Wilma has gone, leaving no reason and no trace. She said in the note she left that it was her duty to go, and that she would appeal to a friend. We are all at the greatest loss without one trace of a clue to show us in which direction to turn with a hope of finding her."

"She must be found, she shall be!" declared Erle, in the same strangely vehement way.

But the days wore themselves out, and Wilma's friends were worn along with them through anxiety for her; but neither Erle's declaration, which was followed by his earnest action, nor Captain Leigh Bernham's widely instituted search, nor Mr. Richland's perplexed following of their two examples, resulted in any return or hint of success. Crayton had faded out of the field almost before the others engaged in it—faded as well from the familiar places which had known him daily before, but which now knew him not.

Thus for three days.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STRICKEN VILLAGE.

THREE busy, anxious days they had been, up in the little Westmoreland village. Malignant typhoid was sweeping its way with an irresistible force, and had stricken a third of the population in this short time. Scarcely a family where one or more members had not succumbed to the disease. One of the Biffin children had died, and on the morning of the third day the still little form lay in its plain casket. Before night another one had passed out of life, and the same grave would receive them both.

There were indefatigable workers in the midst of the suffering, frightened people. Dr. Joy, burly and gruff, and inveighing against the wilful disregard of all sanitary measures, until the shock of a calamity like this fell upon them, courting disease by their habits of living, their over-crowded, ill-ventilated houses, was doing his best to mitigate the affliction. His own regular round of patients, together with this added strain, had kept him at his best effort for three days and three nights, but the doctor was one of those prickly human burrs that will bristle all over and resent as an injury any recognition of his own warm-heartedness, or persistent sacrifice of his own comfort.

"If I care to waste any time in blowing up these foolhardy villagers," Dr. Joy would say, "and punish them with physics and drugs they ought never to need in this healthy atmosphere, it's their lookout, not mine. They have no business to leave the door open for the thief to walk in. If they had taken the advice of Miss Erle there, and drained off the quagmires at their back doors, three months ago, they might have spared themselves the visitation. Talk about the hand of Providence! In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the people owe such visitations to their own folly and neglect. For the credit of human intelligence I'd like to see some common sense brought to bear among the lot, and as long as they shirk that result of their own accord they'll have to take it in the homœopathic doses we can force upon them."

Prudence was invaluable, and Miss Erle spent her days chiefly at the village. Even when not there in person she was in mind, laying plans and issuing orders for the comfort of her stricken flock. Wilma went with her, the quiet little hands and gentle voice and sweet face exerting a soothing influence over the invalids until gruff Dr. Joy, stopping her once, laughingly declared that her ministrations bid fair to rival his own bitter draughts and caustic lectures.

Miss Erle had driven down to the village for the second time that day. It was near evening, the wintry sun appearing in occasional cold gleams between gray clouds massed against the sky. Wilma

had gone with her into the Biffin cottage, and stood for a moment looking down at the two still little forms already robed for burial. It seemed a happy escape for them as she turned away and met the sight of the narrow house overcrowded with the living yet sharp-featured, unhealthy little faces looking out from all sides, another child and the mother taken down with the disease.

Prudence had worked wonders in bringing neatness and order out of the chaos which had reigned, but at its best, and subdued by the presence of sickness and death, such a prospect as life there offered turned Wilma sick at heart for a moment and made her glad to get back into the free air, with a chilly breeze rushing through the straggling village streets.

"They say some one is wanted to stay with Mrs. Brooke," said Miss Erle, coming out to join her a moment later. "Cases have multiplied so fast, and the people here are so inefficient, that those who are competent to attend are obliged to change from place to place as they are most needed. The Brooke woman is low, past hope of recovery the doctor says. Would you mind sitting with her, Wilma, while I visit the other places? She is both tranquil and conscious now."

"I shall not mind in the least, except to be glad of any chance of usefulness, and if you think Mrs. Brooke will not be alarmed. She appeared so strangely and so strongly agitated when I was there with you first that I have never gone back."

"She was wandering then, her odd conduct simply the result of a delirious fancy. She will not know you, but she does not much notice what goes on about her. You know the house?"

Wilma answered in assent and turned that way, while Miss Erle continued the course of her round. A little brown detached cottage, with a few feet of walk in front, and a gate swinging, as some careless passer-through had left it. Wilma went in, closing the gate and quietly admitting herself, as her soft knock elicited no response. A fire was burning in a little polished stove, a few articles of furniture were ranged about the walls, a shelf of shining tinware and common delf filled a corner, but the room was empty of any presence. A door opening into a second room was ajar, and through it she had a glimpse of a narrow bed, with a gay coverlet thrown over, and a bright rag-mat on the floor before it.

She went through into the sick room quietly. No one was there except the prostrate form upon the bed. Mrs. Brooke was in a slumber, which the girl's silent movement had not broken. Wilma sat down by the bedside, looking compassionately into the sleeping face, thin and worn and touched with age, the hair, which struggled down upon the pillow, iron gray, the hollow cheeks and wrinkled forehead and closed eyes looking deathly in their pallor and hard stillness. She was so perfectly still that with a little thrill of awe Wilma put out her hand to touch the pale forehead. Light as the touch was it aroused the sleeper, and the sunken eyes came wide with a startled glance up into the young face bending above her.

"I did not mean to wake you," she said, "I came to sit with you for a little time. If you can sleep again, do so."

The woman shrunk away, her eyes, startled and staring, not leaving the girl's face.

"Who are you?" she asked, in a hollow whisper.

"You touched me, didn't you?"

"Yes; it was I that waked you. I am Wilma Wilde, and I stay with Miss Erle. Can I do anything for you?"

"No, no," the woman answered, and lay still, with that same strange look still fixed upon Wilma's face. Such a steady sort of awed gaze that Wilma grew embarrassed under it first, then restless, with something very like a dread of those fixed, staring eyes. She was glad when a neighboring woman came in presently to give the medicine the doctor had left. The interruption seemed like the lifting of an incubus which had weighed upon her.

"Are you staying?" the woman asked, in a whisper. "I'll not be then. My man is coming down with it I'm thinking, and my hands are full enough at home. It's a sore day for all that brought the scourge down upon us."

She went, and still the sick woman regarded Wilma with that same intent, curious look. The impression she derived from it lingered with her afterward—an uncomfortable sense, a vague realization of some meaning or some cause underlying it which had an undefined relation to herself.

The sound of a footstep and a knock at the outer door brought a relief to her sense of oppression. She arose hastily, with a desire to escape the gaze which followed her even then. She had not doubted opening to Miss Erle, but, instead, it was a masculine figure looming against the gray clouded atmosphere, which obscured all trace of the sunset. A rather tall, thin figure, with an overcoat buttoned to the chin and traveler's cap slouched about his ears; for the first instant she did not recognize any thing familiar about him.

"Miss Wilde!" exclaimed the voice belonging to the form. "I fancy I need never be tempted to rail against unpropitious fates after this, and I should as soon have thought of looking for you in Jericho! I wonder if you have an idea of what a hue and cry has been raised after you, Miss Wilma?"

His glove had come off and he was clasping her hand before she had recovered from her first start of surprise. Certainly Crayton was the last person she could have expected to meet in the falling gloom, upon the threshold of that plain little cottage, in the isolated little Westmoreland village.

"Oh, Mr. Crayton, did you follow me here?" cried Wilma, having lost his words in the start her recognition of him had given. "Did they send you? Oh, I am sorry, sorry, if I have distressed them much; but indeed I cannot go back. If you would promise that you will not mention having seen me."

"Surely you must know where my weakness lies, Miss Wilma. And yet I venture to assert that you would never forgive me should I consent to ruin all your future prospects by too close observation of an impulsive young lady's whim. Perhaps you haven't an idea even of what a service I might do you by merely mentioning our meeting here!"

"I am very sure that the very best service you can possibly render me will be to keep silence, Mr. Crayton. If it were possible that any prospect could be made tempting enough to persuade me back to them, I should pray that I might be kept in ignorance of it. I am well cared for, and am happy in finding myself of use here. I am staying with Miss Erle. Oh, Mr. Crayton, promise that you will not force me to leave here by betraying my whereabouts to them. It is best as it is, believe me."

"I must promise against my better judgment, then. But then, I never could refuse a lady, especially a young and pretty one. I'm not obliged to relate that I've seen you here—certainly not. I came on a matter of different business, and because I chance to stumble across the charming object of much solicitude on the part of certain friends of mine just now, it isn't at all incumbent upon me to betray the knowledge which accident merely has revealed. I see that is the view you take of it. Very well, my dear Miss Wilma; much gratification as it might afford me to report your safety and your continuance of regard, I must in all gallantry submit to your wish instead."

"I should like them to know," said Wilma, "that I am safe, and that I do hold them in most grateful remembrance. If I should write just a line saying that, and if you would kindly mail it in the city and not mention seeing me, it would be the very greatest favor I could ask."

She had come out by his side, drawing the door close so only the faintest murmur of their voices could be distinguished in the rooms within.

"I would advise it," said the reporter, earnestly.

"Let me tell you, the Richlands are in a terrible state of anxiety regarding your disappearance, which is equivalent to a Greek puzzle to them. Do you suppose you could manage to make out with a pencil and my note-book here? I'll see that it's put in a form for safe delivery. I rather expect to go back at midnight, and to be busy meantime."

He produced the articles which were required from an inner pocket, and whistled some disconnected bars of an air as he gazed away through the gap between the squat little houses while she hurriedly wrote her message. The air was a keen chill, and Wilma's benumbed fingers produced a tremulous scrawl—her own love and gratitude, sorrow for their distress, an assurance of her safety, and that the course she had taken was much for the best.

"And I venture that yonder is Miss Erle's turnout," said Crayton, as he received the little missive. "Is she waiting there for you?"

"If you only would promise me again," Wilma said, wistfully. "If you certainly will not betray having seen me; if you will mail that to Mrs. Richland, I will be so truly indebted."

"And as I said I can't refuse; but remember, the concession is given against my better judgment."

"Thank you the same, however," said Wilma, warmly, and leaving him, went down the street to meet Miss Erle, who had stopped the carriage to consult with Dr. Joy upon the sidewalk.

"You, Wilma!" said Miss Erle, in surprise. "I thought you understood that I meant to call for you. Just as well, perhaps, since it is so late, and Dr. Joy has promised to look in on Mrs. Brooke directly, and stay with her during the night. Did I see you speak with some one here just now?"

She had nodded her parting to the doctor as Wilma came up, and they were turned on their homeward way now.

"Yes; it was Mr. Crayton," Wilma answered. "He promised when I asked him to say nothing of seeing me here."

"You can't expect it concealed always, Wilma. Crayton! Odd that he should come to the village. Was he going there, do you know—to the Brooke woman's house, I mean?"

Miss Erle glanced back at the step which was empty now, and the bare outlines of the little house against the gloom.

The doctor did not look in there immediately as had been his intention. Another patient grown suddenly and seriously worse claimed him, and it was two hours full before he looked in at Mrs. Brooke's, and meantime Crayton had passed the time without interruption by the dying woman's bedside. Surely and slowly dying to her own knowledge, perceptibly near death to the first glance of an experienced eye.

Her wide, preternaturally bright eyes had turned to meet Crayton as he entered, but fell away with their brightness dimmed in a single moment. He dropped into the seat Wilma had vacated shortly before and leaned forward to look into the pallid face. She glanced up again with an awakened purpose before he had spoken, perhaps wishing to ascertain her condition first.

"I don't know who you are," she said, in her labored, whispering tone. "Can you write?"

"Can and will with the greatest pleasure; my very mission up here by the way, and I came prepared with all the necessities. You don't know me, but I have the advantage there, Mrs. Brooke. Is it something you wish to confess regarding an occurrence which took place some seventeen years ago?"

"Yes, yes," she whispered, eagerly. "Give me time, let me think until it is all quite clear. His face has haunted me, often and often, but I've seen it in the flesh just of late, and it's a girl's face now. I know I'm dying, and I couldn't go into the grave easy with the weight upon me. Are you ready to write?"

"Quite ready in a second, when I put a match to the lamp here." He did it, shading the flame carefully from her eyes, changing his seat to one beside the little table holding the lamp, and upon which he spread his material for writing. "Ready, now; go ahead, Mrs. Brooke."

"I can't tell it as it should be put down," said the woman. "You can do that, or it will make little difference, I dare say, so the plain truth is there. I hadn't meant to ever tell it, and I don't know that I should now but for his face coming up before me, and that girl the very picture of him."

She had not much difficulty in speaking in that whispering voice what was distinct to the reporter's ear, but she was weak, and the continued effort wearied her, and her recital was made at intervals, but Crayton was patient in waiting and helped her with his quick understanding of her broken utterances. "She began:

"Some eighteen years ago I was housekeeper for Matthew Gregory, and had been for years before that. He was a very bad man, but still not a hard master, any way not to me. I never could find the heart to blame him so much as others did. He had married a flighty young thing when he was well in his prime, and it turned out unhappily as such ill-matings generally do. His wife ran away the second year with some old lover who suited her better, leaving their baby-girl in its father's care. All that was long enough before my time in the house. Eighteen years ago the little thing had grown up to be a young lady, the loveliest creature that could have been found anywhere in the two cities, and yet she had scarcely been outside the walls of the old house on the Manchester road, except for one year she had been sent away to a school. It had been a lonely life for the child, and her father never gave her any care or liking that might be seen in those days. She had been called Gertrude after her mother, but the name was dropped after the disgrace was brought by the other Gertrude. She grew up without a name until some one who chanced to see her said she was just like a white rose, as pure and sweet, so after that she was called The Rose, and at last Rose.

"She was seventeen or nearly when a rich lady who lived further out on the road saw and took a fancy to our Rose. Nothing would do but she must have her for a companion, and she got her way, though the master was bitterly opposed. He had always meant that Rose should go into a convent, and he had sent her for a year to a convent school with the understanding that she was to take the veil when she got through with her studies, but she rebelled at the end of the year, and he brought her away again but without giving up his plan.

"Rose went to be companion to the fine lady. She had as much will of her own as Matthew Gregory himself, and she overruled him in those two things, in leaving the convent and in going from the old house to the new home that was offered her. He had been bitter hard in his censure of the mother, and he had all his resentment stirred up against the daughter now, for all he gave way to her.

"There was a worse shock to come to him soon, when Rose disappeared from her employer's house, leaving word only that she had married in secret and had gone to her husband. I don't know what means her father took to trace her up. He did it though; he found her out, discovered more than I knew of afterward.

"He came to me one day to say he had discovered another person to fill my place. I was all taken aback at that. I had been with him for half a dozen years; I was a quiet body and grown used to his silent ways. It struck me at last that the man had gone mad to be thinking of a change; but he sat down and explained to me so graciously that I was proud of the confidence he was putting in me, though his news gave me a sore heart for many a day. Rose had been vilely deceived, he said. She was living alone at a little out-of-the-way place he had discovered, where the man she supposed was her husband visited her now and then. The man had another wife married in secret, too. What Mr. Gregory wanted of me was to get a place in that man's house, to find out whether the other wife was a lawful one or not, and which of the two he'd be apt to give up first if it came to the choice. He had found that Mr. Bernham, which was the young man's name, was looking for a servant, one who could be discreet, and when I went to him with the recommendations Mr. Gregory furnished, I had no trouble in getting the place.

"If I hadn't known I never could have believed that young Mr. Bernham was such a villain. He was so frank, seeming so fond of his wife, who was his true wife without a doubt. She was a foreigner, a mere child, too, without a relation in the world, and with some fortune in her own right which was keeping them then. The marriage was kept secret because somebody who was expected to leave a great deal of property to Mr. Bernham would be sure to disinherit him if it ever found it out. It was the very same story that had been told to Rose, and which she was believing in then. My foreign mistress fairly worshiped her husband, but she had a hot temper, and she was dead jealous of him for all her love. She told me about their having a quarrel once when a very beautiful young lady had looked so strangely at her Raymond in the street; she had been sure it was some other love of his, but she quite believed him, after they had made it up, that it was all an imagination of her own. She would trust him perfectly in every thing, she said, and she meant it, but she couldn't help her own nature, poor thing!

"It took me whole weeks to discover all my old master wished to know, but I did at last. I saw the certificate of their marriage by a clergyman known

in the city, dated four months before the time our Rose had disappeared. I found out what I could of Mr. Bernham's plans. He had been a military student, and was expecting his commission now daily, but he meant to resign it rather than be parted from his wife.

"When he had learned that much, Mr. Gregory came to the house one day when my young master was out. He had an interview with Mrs. Bernham, and he must have told her the whole story. He had been with her a good hour when the bell rung and I went up, and as I opened the parlor door I heard her say:

"I will go with you and show her such proofs that she shall be convinced, but I will never see him again so long as we both live—never!"

"She was dressed to go out, but she looked more like a corpse than a living woman with the glimpse I had through her veil. She left a note with me to be given to her husband, when he should come, and went away with Mr. Gregory, and I knew then, well as I knew afterward, that she would never come back to that house. I gave the note as I was bound to do when Mr. Bernham came. I never knew what it was she wrote, but I shall never forget the awful look of despair on his face when he had read it. He was like a man gone wild for a time. He shut himself up alone and came out, hours afterward, looking ten years older than before. He talked with me quietly for a time, not once referring to her, but of the house and what was to be done. He had got his commission, he said, and would leave next morning to join the army on the frontier. He said good-by to me, and gave me my wages, and a reminder, and left the house overnight. I think he couldn't bear to stay in it alone.

"Somehow I got a restlessness over me next morning to really see him off, and to say a last word, maybe, for I never could harden my heart against him, though I had tried. I knew what train he would take, and I was at the depot before the time, looking for him in the crowd there. I saw him presently, but while I was studying whether or not to push through and speak, the very picture of him came up from the other side. There they stood, face to face, so much alike that I couldn't have sworn which one was my master. They shook hands and spoke, and then I knew, for there was a difference in their voices, and a change came into their faces as they talked; but I stood dumbfounded and bewildered until they had gone away together before my very eyes. I wasn't quick at understanding then, but I knew the truth afterward. They were twin brothers, and the one that was my master was not the one who had married Rose. But when I was sure of the truth, Rose was gone, no one knew where, and when I taxed Mr. Gregory with having known, he advised me to hold my tongue on the matter. He gave me quite a sum of money as I was out of a place, he said, but it was no more than a bribe, as I knew, but I took it, and it's that has been on my conscience ever since.

"Rose died at her father's house months after, and left a tiny babe that must have grown into the girl I saw here. She has the very face of my young master, which was the same as her father's face, and a little look of Rose; she ought to know the truth which Matthew Gregory would never tell her. Her father was killed in a battle, I believe; at least that was the report."

That was the story as Crayton took it down from her broken telling of it. All the strength which had sustained her seemed exhausted as it was done. Dr. Joy entered at the moment, and after one searching glance at her, turned to the reporter.

"Does she want to sign that?" he asked, his eye falling upon the paper. "It must be done at once if at all. She is almost gone."

The dying woman rallied, while, with Crayton's help, she affixed her name to the sheet with the two men as witnesses; and with her work complete, she drifted quietly out upon the great eternal sea.

CHAPTER XXV.

CRAVEN DALLAS, M. D.

A SLIGHT snow fell during the night, and the air was full of cutting, bitter, frozen sleet next day. It rattled against the plate-glass of the long windows in the Richland drawing-room, and made a slippery coating over the snow where it was not broken up in the gutters.

"A bitter day to be out," said Ethel, with a little shiver and a glance at the cheerless aspect. Mrs. Richland looked around listlessly. She had a glimpse beneath the sweep of the ruddy silken curtains within of icy pavement, where occasional forms hurried past; a woman, thinly-clad, and shivering, flitted before her eyes, a vivid contrast in suggestion of her worn, pinched, impoverished condition to this air of warmth and luxurious comfort. Homeless in the streets! There could be nothing in the thought to strike a chill to her heart, or change the weary listlessness of her expression. Her glance went back to the glowing coals as she answered:

"A dreary day, indeed!"

Observant of the ennuied face, Ethel forbore to utter the thought which had been first in her mind with the sight of the bitter outdoor weather. It had been a sad wonder where Wilma might be on this freezing wintry day; while they had every luxury about them, might she not be unsheltered, friendless and alone, suffering, when all this abundance might have been freely hers.

"I fear that Howard is more than half-right," Ethel thought, with another glance at the graceful shape lying idly back in a chair before the hearth, the white, ringed hands loosely folded, and the drooping lashes almost sweeping the fair cheeks. The face was like fine sculpturing, as perfect and as

still. "Gertrude certainly has not seemed well of late. She always was quiet and undemonstrative, but she has appeared like one moving in a dream for days past, ever since the day that Wilma was lost to us."

She went out a few minutes later, leaving the other alone. Then Mrs. Richland locked up at a little object which had strangely fascinated her all the morning. It was simply a common-looking brown envelope bearing her husband's address in stiff characters, only such a letter to all outward appearance as any business-man may receive by the score every week; but common-looking and coarse, Mrs. Richland could not overcome an uneasy impression the sight of it had given her. She had singled it out from the package when the mail was brought in, and when her husband passed it to her inadvertently along with the papers and a magazine and a letter for herself, that impression so strong led her to let it remain under their cover while he talked on, unconsciously making references to his own voluminous correspondence.

"By the way," he remarked, folding the last mis-sive with his methodical precision, "I asked Lenoir to bring Captain Leigh Bernham around with him this evening. It is only right that we, as Wilma's friends, should extend much courtesy to Wilma's father, though the slight, if any, has been rather on his side before this. I certainly thought he would have taken the initiative and called upon us after breaking the case. Lenoir reports him busy and anxious and half-disheartened at finding no trace. Lenoir himself is a fine young fellow, by the way—talented and bound to make his mark. I find myself really attached to him."

His gaze chancing to rest upon his sister's face caused her a sudden embarrassment unlike her usual control, and making a hurried apology she left the breakfast-room where they were gathered. He turned to his wife with a slightly-troubled expression.

"Do you suppose there can be a danger of Lenoir entertaining more than a mere friendly regard for Ethel?" he asked. "The possibility occurred to me once before when something suggested it, but I'd be willing to stake my own honor against his, and of course he is aware of the engagement. Ethel is a very lovable girl, but I should not like to think that Lenoir is to meet with any disappointment through her."

"Did it ever occur to you, Howard, that Ethel might also care for Lenoir? I have imagined before now that he was even better suited to her than Erle, and scarcely doubt that there would have been a different result had that childish engagement never existed."

"There might have been in that case, but it did and does exist, and Ethel is too true to depart from her duty, no matter for what fancy. Your idea is preposterous, Gertrude, if it reaches the extent of her wavering from Erle. Ethel is a Richland, and we have always been good as our word, I believe. Why, it is one of our proudest boasts that no disgrace has ever touched our family, and I would feel it a blot on our family honor, kept spotless for generations, if any thing could induce her to prove faithless to Erle now. A very preposterous idea, my dear!"

"If she really could not love the one to whom a childish promise bound her," persisted Mrs. Richland, her earnest eyes upon her husband's face—"if in spite of her own efforts to be true she found herself lacking, loving the other as she should the man she is to marry, could you not pardon her for breaking her unconsidered promise, for proving at least true to herself?"

"That doesn't apply to Ethel in the least," he answered, uneasily. "Ethel did consider her promise, and it is quite too late for even the remotest contemplation of a change. She has not the slightest thought of it, I will warrant. Just as I say; a Richland never has been and let me hope never may be associated with the disgrace of broken honor, through word or act."

"It was only a suppository case I was putting," Mrs. Richland said, quietly. "Ethel has no idea of proving any thing but true to her word, I am very sure."

The conversation lingered with her after her husband had gone to his day's business.

That inexorable family pride and jealousy of the family honor, how could it stand the shock, the knowledge and dread of which hung so threateningly over her? Ah, better, better far had she never known any thing different from the loneliness and rebellious dissatisfaction of her cheerless girlhood days; better that she had borne the weight of misery which had come to her later through all time alone, than that she should have taken up this new life to result now in the shock of humiliation and pain and disgrace which would reflect from her to the kindly, generous but proud man who had been the best of indulgent husbands to her for fifteen years.

She had carried the letter addressed to him which he had missed into the drawing-room, and placed it in sight on the low marble mantle, and there it had lain like some evil tempter before her sight in the hours since. The stiff, legible characters of the address staring back at her were like a challenge. Studying as she looked, she put up her hand presently and took it from its resting-place. Mrs. Richland seldom hesitated when she had once reached a decision, and she did not now hesitate in mastering the contents of that aggravating missive. There fell from the envelope, as she opened it, a card, printed:

CRAVEN DALLAS, M. D.

and on the reverse side was written in that stiff hand of the superscription:

"Dr. Dallas will do himself the pleasure of calling upon Mr. Richland at six this evening, and hopes to be admitted to a private audience. He ventures to assert that the revelation which authorizes his demand will prove fully satisfactory to the latter."

That was all. Mrs. Richland crushed the card in her hand and sat looking into the coals again with that deeply-absorbed gaze which might have been looking back through the years which were past, or forward into that threatening future the shadow of which was upon her even now.

Later that day Lenoir was admitted into Captain Bernham's apartment, and made known the mission with which the banker had charged him.

"Go with you to the Richlands; I go there?" said Captain Bernham, taking a turn across the floor and pushing back the hair from his forehead in vexed impatience. "I'll be hanged first!" Seeing Lenoir's quiet surprise the captain modified his tone suddenly.

"I'm not used to polite society," he said, shortly; "I've roughed it on the frontier with little enough of ladies' society at the barracks for the greater part of the last seventeen years. I'd find myself wonderfully out of place in a fashionable drawing-room, I'm afraid. My compliments to Mrs. Richland, and that as my reason for declining."

"Let me hope you may conclude yet not to decline," Lenoir urged. "I am very sure you will not regret it if you once go, Captain Bernham. They are so warmly attached to Wilma and so deeply interested in whatever may pertain to her welfare, that they are prepared to receive you quite as a friend with that bond between you. Let me call for you at the time I have appointed for going this evening."

The captain had stopped and was staring gloomily out at the chill aspect the street presented. After all, why should he not go? Rose was dead to him, and he was nothing in the world to Rose. He had thought after that night at the opera that he should never wish to see her face again, but now an undefinable longing came over him to stand before her, to touch her hand perhaps, to hear her speak, and with the presence of the man whom she had preferred to him there as a reminder, to bring the conviction yet more firmly home to him that a barrier impassable as the grave itself stretched between them. A weaker man might have shrunk from such a trial of himself, but Captain Bernham's iron discipline had stood him through trials before this and would again.

"I have reconsidered," he said, when he turned. "You may come this way, or I will take up with you at the office if you like better."

Lenoir, promising to return, left him. There is so much irregularity attendant upon the business of a newspaper daily, such lack of smooth connection sometimes in its various departments and in the movements of its detailed corps, that no one of the many composing the great whole can always be informed regarding what unexpected duty may devolve upon him at a moment's notice. It proved so in Lenoir's case this late afternoon. Some one of the staff had failed in the amount of "copy" which should have been forthcoming at that hour. Could Lenoir make good the deficiency? It was the chief of the staff asking it in the tone which takes for granted the assent which he did not wait to hear. Lenoir, thus appealed to, could and did, but the gas was flashing through the streets and the red glow of the furnaces was reflected over the city and fell like dull stains on the dark, rough surface of the rivers, before he returned to redeem his promise to Captain Bernham.

The latter had come down into the street, expecting him minutes before. He was pacing the pavement slowly, that consoler of many a tedious hour before this, his meerschaum, his companion now, his tall, soldierly form and bronzed and bearded face perfectly distinct in the glare illuminating the front of the hotel.

The two paused in it for a moment while Lenoir made his explanation, then linked arms and walked away. In the time he had passed walking up and down there no intuition had come to Captain Leigh Bernham of the watchful eyes upon him, no single quiver warned him of what wistful, longing, despairing eyes they were, losing no motion of his, reading the changed, stern face, noting the gray which mingled in his luxurious beard and tinged the hair, cut close to the massive, handsome head. They followed him down the line of light as the two walked together in the direction of the bridge.

Then the tall, muffled form, which had been stationed within the shadow of a doorway opposite, passed out and mingled with the crowd upon the street. When the proprietor of the shop which owned the doorway found time to look out for a moment he noticed the quiet lady who had been waiting there three or four previous half-hours. The tall shape, graceful and well-proportioned, despite the dragging wraps, went with swift, unhesitating steps through the thronged and lighted streets. Her way took her to a dingy, over-built locality, where the original tenements jostled each other to make room for the handsome compact blocks fast approaching them, up the steps of one that sad shabby genteel written all over its spindling light, from the narrow windows, with their flimsy inner drapings, to the soiled white stones under her feet, with rusty balustrades on either side. Her hand was upon the bell-pull when the door was thrown open and a man came out from the large bare hall. She made a step forward and dropped her hand upon his arm as he was passing.

"Mr. Crayton, I was on my way to ask for you. No, don't turn back. I only wished to know if you

have discovered anything regarding Wilma. I have some way had an impression that you might."

Crayton, never very readily surprised and certainly never taken aback by any such simple, unexpected occurrence, took the meeting coolly, whatever his speculations regarding her appearance unattended at that hour and in that place may have been.

"I said before this that you were a lady of unusual penetration, Mrs. Richland, and this proves it. I am most happy to inform you that I have news regarding Miss Wilma; in fact, it was somewhere near this time last evening that I promised not to betray the fact of meeting with her to any of you."

"You have seen her? Surely you will not refuse to tell me where?"

"Surely I will not," Crayton answered. They had both descended to the sidewalk, and he offered his arm over the way. "Rash promises are better broken than kept, you know, and, truth to tell, I hadn't an intention of keeping this one. I left Miss Wilma up in Westmoreland with our friend Miss Erle, with abundance of employment in the way of angelic ministrations among a lot of sick villagers. She gave me a little note for you, expecting, I rather believe, that I would post it from some part of the city. I was just starting out to deliver it in person, knowing how precious it was sure to be to you."

She gave an upward glance into his face to detect if her fancy of a pointed meaning in his words had any foundation, but he was fumbling at a pocket, from which he drew forth a little folded slip, apparently quite indifferent to her. Just then they came upon the stronger glare of light and the stir of the crowd which thronged Fifth avenue.

"Did you have your carriage?" Crayton asked, as she paused there. "Can I take you to it, or send it to you, Mrs. Richland?"

"Thanks, but I am not going back now. I will not detain you, Mr. Crayton. Thanks again for the service you have done in bringing tidings of Wilma, and this from her hand."

"And that cuts short my hope of a seat and a comfortable ride across," soliloquized the reporter, as he watched her disappear within one of the gay bazars lining the way. "Whew! what a wind it is. That is too bitter to face in crossing the bridge afoot, I'll be bound." He took a car from the Sixth street terminus, settling back into a corner, and was apparently dozing in a moment's time.

And meanwhile Captain Bernham, with Lenoir, had reached the Richland mansion. A clock was striking the quarter-hour as they entered; it was a quarter past six. Precisely as the same clock had rung out six chimes, William Thompson had answered a summons and opened to Dr. Dallas.

"Show me at once to your master," commanded the doctor, loftily, "he is expecting me. Or, stay, where is he? I'll not trouble you, my man."

Mr. Richland was at that moment in the library, and at a word the doctor turned that way. The banker glanced inquiringly at the visitor who admitted himself in that unceremonious manner, and rose to draw a chair closer the fire with true courteous hospitality.

"Be seated, sir, said the banker. "You wished to see me, I presume."

"Thanks, Mr. Richland, yes. You were expecting me, of course—Dr. Dallas, Craven Dallas at your service, sir. I had the pleasure of informing you by letter this morning of my intention just now put into effect."

Dr. Dallas delighted in smooth, well-rounded sentences, and never more particularly than when the velvet of his words covered the inclination and the ability to use hidden power of his own to a ruthless purpose. A stiffness came into Mr. Richland's manner instantly.

"I received no such letter," he said. "Will Dr. Dallas kindly explain what his business may be in brief terms? I am expecting friends at any moment now."

Any resentment the doctor may have felt at the change of tone was quickly smothered.

"I explained in my missive of the morning that I have a revelation of importance to make to you. I would really rather not be precipitate in breaking it. We medical men learn to be cautious over the chance of giving sudden shocks after knowledge gained from a long course of practice. When you are fortified to hear what I fear may prove disagreeable news—"

"Pray say whatever you may have to say briefly as possible," Mr. Richland interrupted him. "I am a man of few words myself, Dr. Dallas, and prefer being dealt with after my own fashion."

"Your will is my pleasure, then," the doctor replied, smoothly, but with cold gleams coming into his restless eyes. "It is my duty to inform you, Mr. Richland, that you have been laboring under a misapprehension for the past fifteen years, which may prove both disagreeable and embarrassing in the result. The lady who kindly listened to your suit then was unfortunately not free to listen. She had a former husband alive at the date of her marriage with you; she has a daughter, the issue of that first marriage, alive to-day."

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHERE THE DOCTOR MADE HIS MISTAKE.

For one second Mr. Richland's face was a blank. The astounding impudence of the man sitting there under the glow of his own lights, by the warmth of his own fireside, and deliberately attacking him with an assertion which exceeded all limits of possibility, took his breath for a second, while his comprehension of the reality of the charge came slowly. Indignation and amazement came with it, struggling into every line of his smooth, florid face.

Mr. Richland was never much given to demonstration. His was both a generous and noble spirit, but it was not a quick or clever one. This accusation was the furthest from any which might have gained credence with him, and except for his bewilderment it had no other result than to arouse his indignant surprise.

"Upon my word, the man is surely mad!" ejaculated Mr. Richland, with a half-pitying, half-angry stare into the sallow countenance, sneering and forbidding, with the crafty eyes not meeting his own honest ones, but still watching furtively every change of the banker's face. "You surely are mad, Dr. Dallas, to come with such a flimsy, shameless attempt at imposition. Understand, sir, that my wife is above all reproach."

"I am quite as sane as yourself, Mr. Richland. You might be pardoned thinking me otherwise if I had come with an unbiased assertion only, but I have the pleasure of announcing myself an eye-witness, an active agent I may say, to a share of what the accusation embraces. I can very positively swear to the identity of the present Mrs. Richland with a patient I had under my care, seventeen years ago. She was the only daughter of my friend and patron lately deceased, Matthew Gregory."

Mr. Richland leaned forward in his chair, a quick change flashing into his face, his lips parting, but sober second thought was there in time to check the impulse which would have led him to speech. Let the man bring forward his charges, absurd and presumptuous as they may be. He was very evidently determined to be heard, and it would be time enough to summon William Thompson to put him out forcibly, if need be, when he understood where this groundless revelation was intended to lead.

"You were about to deny that," said the doctor, drawing a quick inference from the other's manner. "You were not kept in ignorance of your wife's relationship with him then, and that should be one point toward your concession of the whole truth. I certainly assure you that it is truth, and I can prove so much of it that I think you will not refuse to concede the rest. If you doubt my word you are quite at liberty to call in the lady herself and see how she will face the facts I have to tell. I had the pleasure of wringing a tacit admission of it all from her, not very long since. If you want perfect satisfaction, by all means let Mrs. Richland have a hearing also."

"You must know that you have made very unqualified and preposterous charges," said the banker, in the slow, heavy way of a man assured in his own stand, but perplexed by the movement of an enemy. "I could not think of subjecting Mrs. Richland to the simple annoyance of refuting them. You have attempted to perpetrate a most atrocious slander, and my advice to you is to drop the matter before you further commit yourself. I am willing to overlook this much of whatever malicious intention has led you so far."

"But I have no desire that you shall overlook it, Mr. Richland. I tell you in sober fact that the lady you have supposed to be your wife was the wife of another man living when you married her. I tell you more, that she is the mother of a child who lives to-day, whom you have had in your very house, whom you have known as Wilma Wilde. I daresay it never occurred to you to wonder what was the strong interest your wife found in the girl. You had no reason to suspect, of course, a fact of which the lady herself was in ignorance until a short time since, but the maternal perception is strong and subtle and far-reaching, as surely this proves. I repeat, your wife has never been your wife, and Wilma Wilde is her daughter, acknowledged by her, as I shall prove to you."

Mr. Richland breathed a silent inspiration of relief. Not wavering nor convinced by so much as a line, such a positive unmistakable assertion necessarily resulted in the extreme of annoyance to him, but this the doctor's last words had materially lightened. Lunatic or villainous schemer, whichever he might be, Dr. Craven Dallas had surely overreached himself. Wilma, his own wife's child—Wilma, the daughter of a marriage consummated before he had ever met her, and existing still when she had taken vows of closest fealty to him! Carefully as he might have concocted the remainder of his plot, in making that declaration, Dr. Dallas had surely committed himself.

In that moment Mr. Richland had a grateful if vague and incomplete comprehension of what wise orderings are those of the inscrutable Providence ruling all. Not many days since he had been inclined to regret the chance that had resurrected to knowledge this unknown and unsuspected father of Wilma, who would claim her whenever found; it had a selfish regret springing from his own warm affection for the girl, and his own intentions regarding the future. Now with this atrocious attempt to fix a base scandal upon them, the very fact which had been a source of scarcely acknowledged dissatisfaction would serve to refute it. What better testimony than that of Wilma's father to offer against whatever cunningly-woven deceit Dr. Craven Dallas might have in readiness? He could almost smile in anticipation of the doctor's entire defeat, but that his indignation was too deeply touched to admit of it. That same indignation was very perceptibly reflected in his face turned coolly incredulous upon the other.

"You have been guilty of attempting the basest of subterfuges, one calculated to inflict the very deepest injury. I presume there can be no doubt of your motive, and the desire to extort money never led to a more villainous endeavor. It has failed as it deserved to do. I hope it will not be necessary to assure you in yet more unmistakable terms."

There was menace in both voice and face, which Dr. Dallas did not fail to note, but the fact in no way lessened his complete serenity.

"By the powers! it is a pity to mar such perfect trust, such entire belief in that thing which never had any existence, a woman's good faith. You are not by any means alone in finding yourself a victim of long and deep deception, Mr. Richland. I am not departing from the truth in any single statement of mine, as the result shall show—a result which I invite, and one I fancy you will even consider worth money to stop before the evening is over. Three years before you fell in love with the present fair mistress of this fair mansion, that interesting experience had its precedent in her life, and she was even more easily wooed and won than in your subsequent short and successful courtship. She was married to a wild young military student, who called himself Raymond Leigh. It was not his own name, however, but that fact does not affect the validity of the marriage. His real name was Bernham. Ah, possibly you may have received some hint which leaves my statement already seeming less absurd."

The banker had given a great start, and his ruddy face turned pale. The effect of that sallow, sneering countenance opposite, that quietly impressive yet mockingly triumphant tone, and the sudden dragging forward of the name which had been associated with his own stronghold of defense, combined, gave him a start and a stunned sense of having lost some important part from his hitherto unshaken trust. Dr. Dallas had gained an advantage which he was quick to follow up.

"They married in secret, and lived in secret for a little time, but my old friend Gregory was more than equal to the portion of caution exercised by the young people. He had intended his daughter for a convent life, and it had been a clashing of two strong wills between them, and she had first resisted and then conquered in a way Matthew Gregory was apt neither to forget nor forgive. He found them, and he found means to separate them; what means, it is safe to infer that no living person very well knows. Young Bernham's commission and orders came in time to prevent an explanation and reconciliation, if such might have been made, and a few months later came the report of his death. She believed it, you can give your wife credit for that, Mr. Richland; but, unfortunately for your case now, instead of meeting questionable honor, death upon the battlefield, Lieutenant Bernham had thrown up his commission, and taken himself to that Eldorado—the mining districts of California. Life in the mines has a wonderful fascination with it, and it is not so strange that he stayed there quite as good as dead to people here, so far as his own intervention was concerned."

Mr. Richland had listened with a dread and a sickening fear weighing upon him. He would have liked to throw the lie back in the man's face; he wanted to proclaim his own unshaken belief in his wife, and he could only sit weighted down by that chilling apprehension, his gaze held by the cold, crafty lights of the gray eyes turning the full of their mocking triumph upon him now. With an effort he broke the spell upon him and arose, a purple flush coming into his face, and his voice sounding hoarse and unnatural to his own ears.

"It is a base fabrication, all of it. How dare you attempt to impose it upon me?"

"I have dared more with less assurance before this, Mr. Richland. Try me in regard to this if you dare. I am willing to substantiate my own statements. If you doubt still, or if you wish further assurance, by all means let Mrs. Richland speak for herself. I can bring a witness to prove the date of her *real husband's death*—not a willing witness, perhaps, but who will not dare to refuse his testimony."

Mr. Richland, his hand on the back of his chair, stood staring in a bewildered way upon Dr. Dallas, easy and confident opposite. The date of her real husband's death; and if there were truth in any of this miserable story he had been hearing, that other husband was alive and expected every moment there in that very house. What horrible delusion did the doctor labor under since he could render such a vivid impression of it with all these contradictions rising to confuse. Mr. Richland could make nothing of it. And while he stood, not speaking, the library door was thrown back.

"Captain Bernham and Mr. Lenoir!" the footman announced, and ushered them in according to the orders which had been left with him an hour before.

The banker turned his pale face, and Lenoir pressed forward, with an exclamation of alarm.

"What has happened, Mr. Richland? Are you ill? Have you had any tidings?"

Mr. Richland, shaking off his bewilderment, gave his hand with a negative to the questions, and acknowledged an introduction to Captain Bernham, his eyes searching the still disciplined face of the latter, and noting his fine, soldierly form—surely a man in whom he could repose a trust.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said, in that voice sounding so unlike his own. "You have come at an opportune moment, most opportune since upon you, Captain Bernham, rests the decision of an accusation which has proved to me startling and incredible to an extreme; an accusation made by that person, Dr. Dallas. You, sir,"—to the doctor—"may explain as you like."

The doctor's sallow face had very slightly changed at sight of Captain Bernham, but his eyes had taken up their shiffling, uneasy habit, and, self-acknowledged or otherwise, the doctor inwardly quailed before that commanding presence. For all that, he lost none of his cool impudence, which also might have been mingled with a dash of defiance.

"I have just now made it my duty to reveal to Mr.

Richland the rather disappointing misapprehension under which he has labored during the past fifteen years. It has proved something of a shock to him, as is simply natural that it should. You, Captain Bernham, are a witness I should have been forced to call upon sooner or later. You cannot refuse to bear me out in the assertion that the present Mrs. Richland was truly Raymond Bernham's wife, and that Raymond Bernham's death dates no further than two years back. Mrs. Richland has never had a legal claim upon the title she wears; she is Raymond Bernham's widow, never Mr. Richland's wife."

With a couple of long, swinging strides, Captain Bernham stood by the doctor's side. His sunbrowned countenance was impenetrable as steel, but his eyes flashed menace and warning down upon the banker's vis-a-vis.

"You, you sneaking, paltry cur!" the captain ejaculated, in the tense, low voice of restrained passion. "You dare to bring such a false assertion to bear against that lady! You, a cowardly assassin, a thief in the night, a miserable hypocrite and sycophant, too contemptible for notice except for the powers you bring into action for the purpose of mischief-making. Your charge against Mrs. Richland is false—false to the last degree. She was never my brother Raymond's wife."

Dr. Dallas, cowering under the suppressed vehemence of word and look, raged nevertheless at this open refutation of the charge, to which he would have sworn with the fullest belief of its truth, then or at any previous time. Dr. Dallas had made one grand mistake in following the clew which had fallen into his hands. He sprang up now, placing the chair between them, for that look blazing in the other's eyes gave the doctor some chilling qualms of distrust.

"I'd swear to the truth of it," he asserted, doggedly. "You know, Captain Bernham, and you deny it because of the fortune in your possession now which will go to his daughter and hers, Wilma Wilde. You know that you don't dare brave out the denial. You stole the certificate and the letters, which would have been ample proof, that were left in my care, but the clergyman who pronounced the marriage ceremony is alive yet, and other witnesses may be found. You may not find it a light matter to commit a theft and to intrigue in keeping possession of an inheritance which is legally another's, Captain Bernham."

"Have a little care, Dr. Dallas. You hired assassins to attack me for the purpose of recovering certain papers from my possession, to which I fancy no other person living has a better right. You failed once, but you worked more subtly and more successfully another time. I demand those papers back from you, and for the sake of avoiding your equivocations and subterfuges, name your own price for them."

The banker, more than ever hopelessly bewildered, more than ever weighed upon by that heavy dread, put back Lenoir, whose quick comprehension had grasped the vaguest idea of the truth, and who would have interposed in aiding Captain Bernham to screen the "Rose" he had loved and who had died to him seventeen years before.

"Tell me, for the sake of heaven, what does this mean? That man has declared Wilma to be my own wife's child; you, Captain Bernham, have claimed her as *your* daughter. I implore you tell me the truth! It is too late for evasions or subterfuges now."

The captain turned upon him like a flash, speaking between close set teeth.

"If you have one consideration for your wife, Mr. Richland, do what you can to stop this matter here. Leave me to deal with this fellow, whose motive may be very readily understood. Once more, Dr. Dallas, will you take the chance which is offered you, and name your price for those papers, and at the same time this wild surmise you have mistakenly derived from them? You will never find a better chance of making terms."

"I tell you I have no papers. You took very good care to insure that, Captain Leigh Bernham, but you are apt to find greater odds which you cannot lay hands upon before this affair is over. I'll swear to the truth of every word I have uttered, and I'll prove it before I am through. Wilma Wilde shall come in for all that is her due. And, by heaven! if it is for no more than the leveling of all this unbending pride, and in return for the scorn with which she has seen fit to treat me before this, all here shall be convinced that Mrs. Richland has a difficulty on hand in the shape of a bigamy—that she had a living husband when she became the recognized wife of Mr. Richland."

"Put it strong, you charmingly disinterested old Bitter Herbs. Say at once, why don't you, that the husband of that time is living yet to-day? Make the scene effective, my dear doctor. Ring up the curtain from the mysteries, and call up the grand tableau, but take some friendly advice along with it, and accept the terms our friend the captain is so liberal in offering."

Another spectator whose presence had been passed unobserved, advanced now with a careless nod to the little group so worked upon by various strong emotions. The reporter, coming close in the others' wake, had admitted himself, and waited, listening, for a favorable opportunity to discover himself.

"Make terms, by all means," Clayton said. "I would advise it on both sides. And, by-the-by, Captain Bernham—speaking of papers reminds me—let me take the occasion to return the wallet, containing something of the sort, which you so kindly loaned me the other night. It has served its purpose admirably, but I have now no further use for it."

Captain Leigh Bernham received the wallet with a suspicious, doubtful glance, which was quite lost

upon the reporter, opened it with a quick survey of its contents, and with a rapid movement, before any one could interfere, dropped it upon the burning coals, where the loose papers flashed up instantly.

"I've another paper may do a trifling service before following those," Clayton continued, coolly. "But first, Dr. Dallas, disappointing though it must be after you have gone so far into the facts of the case, I am positive there will be no objection to having you retire. There isn't a doubt but that either Captain Bernham or Mr. Richland here will consult with you at some subsequent time regarding any claims you may wish to present. Just now, any trouble on your part might make the locality speedily unhealthy for you. A burglar, nabbed and in the lock-up now, is only waiting an opportunity to turn state's evidence, and, among other interesting items, is one of an instigation to plunder a gentleman, which, supported by the evidence of the captain here, might prove embarrassing."

Dr. Dallas had not accepted his defeat, but he was wise enough to see that his chance was lost for this occasion. He took a silent departure under the blaze of Captain Bernham's threatening eyes, and the reporter, with a thin packet in his hand, dropped his careless unconcern as the door closed after him, and stood grave, with a gloomy and what must have seemed a reluctant look in any except that wild, uncaring Bohemian, as he faced the waiting trio.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON AND ON.

Up in Westmoreland the snow had fallen and lay now in a white, unbroken sheet, with a glittering surface reflected under cold winter sunlight. Winds had drifted it in the hollows and against the fences, and a bank of it lay undisturbed under the windows of the old Erle homestead.

A depressing stillness reigned throughout the house. The scourge of the village had seized upon its benefactress. Miss Erle was stricken down in the midst of her usefulness suddenly; fatally the whisper had got abroad, and the grave appearance of bluff old Dr. Joy as he came and went gave no better assurance in answer to the general anxiety. The little village had been stirred aside from its own selfishness by the tidings, and in their own humble way these often ungrateful recipients of Miss Erle's bounty testified to the better impulses her unwearying efforts had aroused in them. Even those mourning over some loss in their own households felt that a heavier loss was in store for them should the watchfulness and care they had resented before this be forever removed.

Wilma had scarcely left her bedside for thirty-six hours, and now, as Dr. Joy was turning from his patient, he caught sight of her pale cheek and heavy eyes. He beckoned her outside the room with an attempt to look stern, but succeeded better in looking anxious.

"A pretty kettle of fish this I've got upon my hands," he said, blusteringly. "Next we'll be having you down along with the rest. I suppose there'd be no use ordering you off to bed, the best place for you, so do the next best thing and get out into this fresh, crisp air, for an hour at least. No, not one word, and as you care to save yourself a deserved berating, don't you dare to venture into one of those village houses. There never was any sense in taking a mite like you into those places to get a philanthropic heart-break over the shiftlessness of such miserable beings. Be off now, and see that you bring a better color back with you."

The doctor watched her as she went out, hooded and cloaked, a few minutes later, her step listless, her motion weary and relaxed.

"That will never do," the doctor growled to himself. "An aimless walk in that frame of mind is good as an invitation to the disease. She wants an object, and she shall have it, by George!"

He made a dash and overtook her at the gate.

"Here, Miss Wilma, make this walk of yours of some account, can't you? Go by way of my house and take a message to my housekeeper, if you're at all inclined to be obliging. Tell her for me that I'll not be home to-night, and she may send my errand-boy across to meet me at the village if I'm not home by noon to-morrow."

"Not much danger of my housekeeper losing sleep through anxiety for me," chuckled Dr. Joy, as he turned back from the gateway. "A stretch of nervousness that would be which my cross-grained old Tabitha would scarcely be apt to indulge even without her experience of a round dozen years in the service of that slave of all times, a country doctor."

Transparent though it may have been, Wilma received the message in the best of faith. The doctor's house stood a full mile beyond the village, and the sun far down in the west warned her to make haste to accomplish the long walk while daylight lasted. She had delivered her errand, and was returning more slowly, as the evening set in. It was a sorrowful heart Wilma was carrying over the homeward way. She had lost sight of her own troubles in a great measure in the task which had engrossed her here, but a new sorrow had arisen to suddenly destroy the peace she would have found in this quiet life. Her loving, clinging nature had gone out to Miss Erle in even this short time. She had found her an affable companion and a true friend, and already the tender tie between them was almost broken.

The sun was down, and broad bands of yellow and red stretched across the western sky. A locomotive shrieked behind a belt of leafless trees, and rushed on around a curve into the village. Wilma, pausing to watch it, became aware, for the first time, that

a figure followed her, a woman cloaked and veiled, who lingered as she stood there, and followed again, keeping the same distance. She had taken little notice of the occurrence at first, but as she observed that whether she walked fast or slow the woman following timed to her own pace, the fact fixed itself impressively upon her attention. She had reached the village, and a glance showed her that the attending shape was there still. Wilma stopped short then, vaguely uneasy, and waited, determined to let the veiled figure pass, and so rid herself of the dread which was stealing upon her. But the other also hesitated, and after a moment's hesitation turned and walked swiftly away in another direction.

She had been gone full two hours before she reached the old mansion again, and if she had not implicitly obeyed the doctor's instructions in bringing back a color in her cheeks, at least she had gained a firmer elasticity of step, had shaken off the worst of the weariness which had weighed upon her. There was light glowing within the curtained windows of the parlor, another one glimmering faintly above in Miss Erle's chamber. She went up the steps and let herself into the parlor. It was a large room, and now a cheerful blaze upon the hearth and a bright flame from the chandelier left shadowed spaces, and Wilma, coming from the dusk and chill without, into the light and warmth, was not aware for a moment that the room held another presence. From this place in the shadow the former occupant watched her for a moment; the small face, with saddened eyes, looking down into the fire, the soft, dark hair clinging about the low, wide forehead, and falling in loose curls about the slender throat, just as he had her image photographed upon his mind, except that he had loved to think of her with a happier look. She was slow in glancing around as a step crossed the floor at her side, thinking it only Dr. Joy, but she did glance around at last. Glanced about to find herself face to face with Erle Hetherville. For a second her breath was stilled, her heart beat irregular and faint through the surprise of seeing him. He had expected the meeting, and was greeting her with a brother's affectionate kindness as she recovered from the faintness, which came and went within a brief moment.

"Wilma, dear child, knowing you were to be found here has lifted a dreary weight from the minds of your friends. And yet you are scarcely looking well. I can understand that you, too, have been worn and weighed upon."

"And you—we were not expecting you before morning, or, at the earliest, the late night train. Dr. Joy sent a telegram only some three hours ago. Have you seen Miss Erle?"

"I received no telegram, and I have not yet seen my aunt. She was asleep when I came in from the depot, scarcely five minutes ago. I shall go to her soon as she awakes, but first I have a surprising revelation to make to you, Wilma."

A startled fear was in Wilma's eyes rather than any wonder of questioning, a fear which was not realized in this delivery of the mission with which he was charged. Her father alive and returned and waiting to claim her, a father's love longing for her, a bright future lying before her! Her father near her even then, and awaiting only for the tidings to be broken, keeping his own impatience in check, and coming within the hour! That was the substance of what Erle told her, as they stood there together, so near yet so far apart, with a painful remembrance of their last speaking together stirring even under the force of the tremulous surprise, half-delight and half-terror at this revelation; the sad certainty of the change which was to come soon to Miss Erle. But still that haunting fear lingered, and she could not put it into words; and there was a subdued something in his manner which was owing to more than his own sorrowful anxiety.

As they stood talking quietly, Dorothy appeared in the doorway to say that Miss Erle was awake and prepared to see other nephew. He leaned over the bed, shocked to note the change in her in this short time. She had lain in a stupor for the most part of her two days' illness, the unconscious quiet varied by flashes of raging fever, and occasional lucid moments. She was conscious now and weakly whispered her welcome to Erle. It was her extreme weakness and that strangely fixed apathy which was baffling Dr. Joy's best skill. She could say but little as he sat beside her, holding one of her thin hands in his firm, tender clasp, but she smiled up at him the infinite content which his presence had brought her.

"We hardly parted right when I was here last, dear aunt Erle," he said, holding her hand closer. "I want to tell you at once, if it will give you any added happiness, that the old way is the same still. I never broke with Ethel, and she has named New Year's day for our wedding."

A troubled expression disturbed the serenity of the wrinkled, and yet fair old face at that.

"And is it truly for the best, Erle? I was wrong then. I have changed since, but I knew it even then, under my own stiff, bad pride. But I have realized it better since, since Wilma has been with me, and I have learned to love her, and to know how worthy she is of even you. If it could come to pass again, Erle, I would never utter one word to influence you."

"It would have been the same, dear aunt. I was bound to consult Ethel's wish and happiness first. I made my mistake in supposing she would meet me more than half way in canceling the old bonds. I shall not be unhappy with Ethel: I do tenderly and dearly care for her."

It was the best assurance he had to give her, and it did not now satisfy Miss Erle. She lay still, gathering strength for what she had to say, and saying it presently, slowly and a little brokenly.

"My last breath shall be a prayer for your truest

happiness, Erle. There is something more. I filled out my will that night, after you had left me; I had it ready for a long time, but something always kept me back when I meant to put in the name of the heir, to sign and witness it. I did it that night, but now I want to have it changed. I must have it done soon—directly!"

"If you mean that you have left all away from me so much the better. I have surely enough, and you as surely have disposed more wisely of it."

"I have thought of that, and shall leave you only some simple remembrance and my blessing, Erle. I want to make a provision for Wilma."

"And even that need no longer trouble you. Wilma is well provided for. If it is not distressing you to hear me talk, let me tell you how." He told her then, omitting all the painful details, of the great good fortune which had even then come to Wilma.

Even then, in the parlor below, Wilma had met her father, and between the two, the strong, bearded and bronzed, soldierly man, and the slight little creature, whose childhood had been so forlorn, there sprang into quick realization all the powerful strength which is ever reciprocated in the love of parent and child. In the hours they were left alone together Captain Bernham told to Wilma the whole story of that early wedding, and of the parting, to which he himself had so recently obtained the key.

"And now, my child, we must find the dear wanderer, upon whom we can never urge a claim. She knew that the revelation was inevitably to come, and she fled before it from her husband's home, let me hope not entirely through fear of us. She believed me false and dead, she believed our marriage no marriage, and the child dead to her from its birth, a waif of disgrace, and if power of mine can effect it she shall believe so still. She is the wife of a noble, true-hearted man, one whom she has learned to love and revere. She had supposed you the daughter of my brother's wife, whom she thought to be my wife, whose jealous delusion helped lead to that long train of misery, and who died in forwarding a revenge upon her supposed rival in Matthew Gregory's house. But she knows the truth at last, she knows where to find you, and she is sure to come here. She may be somewhere in the near vicinity now."

"Do you know it was in the hope of sparing my mother that I left them?" Wilma asked. "My mother! And, oh! why did I not see before!" with a quick catching of her breath as there rushed across her a remembrance of that veiled, muffled figure which had followed her.

"My daughter, what?"

"She is here; she has been here, and she may be gone before this. I know that it was my mother." And then Wilma related the occurrence of the evening which had impressed her with such strange uneasiness.

"And she may be gone before this," said the captain, with a groan. "While we have been losing time—Hark! there is some one asking for you, Wilma."

A tap at the door a moment later and its opening verified the accuracy of the captain's sharp hearing. A half-grown village lad stood there, a messenger who had come up at this late hour to make inquiry after Miss Erle.

"I ha' got summat for you, miss," explained this appearance, staring wide-eyed at the surroundings, while his hand went in search of the pocket somewhere concealed in his ragged garments. "I wur-runt to ha' brung it to you till the mornin', but I moughtn't get away to fetch it then. I goes to the quarry now that the old man's down."

"It was your mother who waited on Mrs. Brooke; I remember now," Wilma said, encouragingly, as the boy's embarrassment seemed evident.

"Yes, miss, and it's from the one that's taken up after her. There it is now, and the old woman says she'd bet her eyes that this one's a lady 'cause she shows it and no showing off neither."

Wilma had got hold of the paper which he produced at last, and Dorothy summarily hustled the lad away. The slip of paper which had come thus prematurely was a fragmentary outburst, betraying how the burden of her anxiety had weighed upon the writer.

"My own dear child—mine—I may call you so in this way now that I know the truth. I had not meant to reveal myself by so much as this, but you also have known, and so near you it is taking all my will to refrain from once seeing you, once taking you to my heart; and I dare not so tempt my own resolve. I could not go quite away without once looking upon your face again, but when I followed you this afternoon and thought you recognized me—" There followed some illegible words. Then—"Something strange is coming over me, but I have been without rest, I have shut myself in an armor for so long that now when I lay it down I am lost. Pity your mother, little Wilma; forgive her if you find that which shall need forgiveness. As for me I shall go on and on—"

And there the writing ended in a broken, wavering line.

"It alarms me," said Wilma, in quick, low tones, looking with the apprehension she could not put in words up into her father's face.

"We must go to her at once; you may save—Heaven knows what!"

But it seemed in the time after that, that no earthly power would suffice in bringing relief to the tempest-tossed soul and worn-out body whose poor refuge was in the cottage where so important a part had been brought to light of the great mistake which had resulted in such manifold misery. She was again the Rose of times past, always the stricken, despairing Rose, weighted by her burden and without a hope. On and on! She was surely going

into the depths of the Valley of the Dark Shadow.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A HOLOCAUST.

THE banker sat before the fire in his own bed-chamber, a bright dressing-robe contrasting with the purplish pallor which had come into his hitherto florid, contented face. It was the morning of the second day after the bitter revelation of truth had come to light, the morning of the second day since the wife who had been his pride had taken flight before the consequences of that revelation, and now it was the lack of trust in his generosity which lingered with him most. The blow had fallen in severe force upon Mr. Richland. He had given way before it, not so much with the yielding of a weak character, as with the stun of a shock which had bewildered and suspended the forces by which he had regulated his entire life, and failing now left him helpless as a child at this emergency.

Ethel had just left him for a moment, and in her absence, Crayton, admitted below, made his way up to the banker's room unannounced. Mr. Richland looked up with a start at seeing him.

"Is there any news?" he asked, with the tremulous eagerness which fears disappointment. "Have you heard anything of her?"

Few looking into the banker's changed, worn face could have resisted a thrill of pity and sympathy, and the reporter's, if concealed, was none the less genuine.

"There is news, Mr. Richland; a telegram from Captain Bernham. They have found her, as I was sure they would, up there in Westmoreland, where they have gone. They have sent the word to have you join them there."

What was there in the reporter's tone to strike such quick dread to the banker's heart? Slow to realize even the consequences which must come to himself, the scandal of publicity which could not well be avoided now, the humiliation of that uncompromising Richland pride, the honor of the name tarnished, and through one he had trusted to the uttermost, his perceptions were proving unusually quick in all concerning her.

"She has been much troubled, the weight of so much dread hanging over her had worn her down. She has been ill up there. Captain Bernham asks you urgently to come at once, if possible, and by your presence stop the rumors which may otherwise get afloat. If you are able to go by the afternoon train, so much the better."

"Now—any time. Ill, and away from her own home? My poor Gertrude!"

The banker had roused himself, speaking with tremulous excitement, but with his voice breaking suddenly at the last. There was more upon his mind than he had yet given utterance to. The subject he had pondered through the long hours of the night and day was struggling in his mind now. His look fixed upon the reporter, and a confidence in him which had grown notwithstanding the part Crayton had taken in raking to light these long-concealed facts, prompted him to speak.

"She has been blameless through all," he said. "She is dearer to me than my own life, and she never was mine. He was the husband of her youth, the father of her child, and yet—oh, my God! must I give her up? I ask you to tell me, in all truth and all honor, what do you think will insure her future happiness best?"

There was a huskiness in the reporter's voice which he could not quite command, a twitching about his mouth that betrayed the true manly feeling which had never been wholly lost under his willful self-neglect.

"On my soul, I'm sorry for you, Mr. Richland, but I do believe she has cared for him all along. I do believe that the assurance she seemed to have of his falsity would never have prevailed upon her to enter upon a second marriage had she not also believed him dead. I think that since she discovered him yet alive she has suffered tortures which neither you nor I can understand, which would kill her or drive her mad to longer endure."

The banker wrung his hand, turning his face away to conceal the spasm which convulsed it.

"I believe you are right, Crayton. He is a noble fellow, Captain Bernham, and better suited, loving her as truly as even I. I don't think I can mistake my own duty now. Will you kindly let Ethel know of this? She will go with me there, of course."

"There is another matter to be considered, Mr. Richland, that of the mischief Dr. Dallas's malicious tongue would do. I really believe it will be better for all concerned to buy him off; while the matter must inevitably be made a nine days' wonder, at least let it be presented in its truthful form, with no misapprehension to reflect upon her. I am willing to undertake compromising with him, if you care to leave the task to me."

"I shall be glad to have you do so. I'll give you an order for any amount you like. Or, now I remember, there's a package of bills in my escrow there, which I intended for Ethel, if it is enough. Will you look?"

Crayton got out the roll of bills under the other's direction, and ran over the amount.

"Enough in plenty, Mr. Richland. A thousand dollars, and trust me that the old fox doesn't get more than half of it."

He met Ethel on his way out, and stopped her to deliver her brother's message.

"I could not quite give him the full impression I derived from the telegram," he said. "I fear she is much more seriously ill than I led him to imagine. It might be as well to prepare his mind for a great change before he sees her."

"Poor Gertrude!" Ethel sighed, tears in her eyes. "And to think we never knew the sufferings she must have borne; so true, so noble at heart, and believing she had been so wronged; hiding her wound from that wrong through all these years, and filling her entire duty in the household here and to my brother, with her own passion never betrayed. Oh, it was hard, hard! We owe much to you, Mr. Crayton, for discovering the truth which may lighten her burden for many years."

"Lord knows whether it has been productive of good or harm," said the reporter, gloomily, "I can't lay claim to any particular good intention in dragging the secret facts to light. There's never much good in anything I've had a hand in, Miss Ethel, and I followed the clew I got of the story with about as little aim as I've put into the rest of my life. I had a curiosity to see where it might lead to, and if there was anything better in my share of the affair, it was a vague hope of sparing you some shock and pain by forestalling Dr. Dallas, who was on the same track with a worse motive. You see you have very little to thank me for."

Crayton did not go directly to the old house on the Manchester road. It was near evening when he made his appearance there, two hours after he had seen the banker and his sister aboard the train for the Westmoreland village.

The doctor met him in a sulkily defiant mood. He had expected some overture before this time—some attempt to make terms and to insure his silence, and more than ever he had fixed himself in his resolve to maintain the stand he had taken, to hurl all the forces of his malignity against the fair, proud woman whose unconcealed scorn had made of him a bitter enemy. Dr. Craven Dallas was eminently a mercenary, but there was a venom in his cold-blooded composition which could at times reach beyond his covetous impulses. In his passion of that night he had failed to comprehend Crayton's declaration, which might have made clear to him his own mistake.

He was in his laboratory when the reporter let himself in with his usual lack of observing formalities. Dr. Dallas met him with no very well pleased expression, but the reporter was there, and not to be rebuffed.

"A rather bad habit that of leaving your front-door unlocked," he said, coolly helping himself to a chair. "Of course you are delighted to have me drop in unannounced, at any time, but you might chance to have some more unwelcome visitors. You have been very successful for a considerable time, Dr. Dallas, but mal-practice and extortion through blackmail, and instigation to assault and robbery, might succeed in bringing you into even more disagreeable quarters than these. What a confounded odor you keep here, by the way, and hot enough to give a fellow a foretaste of what he may expect at the end of that path which sports good intentions in place of a Nicholson pavement."

"It might be made a short step between places," the doctor answered, grimly, with a glance at his charcoal furnace and a mixture bubbling in a vessel over it.

The reporter made known his business shortly, with no useless superfluity of words.

"You don't deserve anything better for your interference in the case than a trial on the charge of attempting to extort money unlawfully, but of course you know yourself secure so far as a complaint from them is concerned. I have been authorized to ascertain what price will secure the silence of that mischievous tongue of yours. You know me, Dr. Dallas, and you know I could easily bring testimony to bear which might end by lodging you at the State's expense for a respectable term of years. Take my advice and name a reasonable price, and wash your hands of all things pertaining to the affair from this time out."

"No argument and no offer of yours could induce me," the doctor answered as coolly. "If you want any result to offer in way of interviewing, Mr. Crayton, take this: that I mean to reassert my right to command the actions of my ward when she is brought to light; that she shall inherit the fortune which is hers by right, and that the Richland pride shall be brought to a lower level. You have something to learn yet if you have never realized that there is sometimes more satisfaction than money gained in a grand stake of revenge."

"You are apt to find a small obstacle in the way of your estimable purpose, however. The fact is, you have most egregiously deluded yourself, Dr. Dallas. You will find a difficulty in assuming any rights of guardianship to Miss Wilde, since she is at present under her own father's protection. Acute as you deserve to be rated, my dear doctor, I really can not comprehend how you so blindly exchanged the identities of the brothers Bernham. Captain Bernham is fully qualified to hold his own against even you, I imagine."

Rage as he might, Dr. Dallas found himself overreached, and the end was that he took up with Crayton's offer, his good faith being assured by the close knowledge of certain transactions of his which the reporter held, together with a self-conviction that Captain Leigh Bernham was not the person he might wish to provoke to further anger or action.

It was not in the doctor's nature to accept a defeat quietly, and the bitter disappointment of this one must have blinded him. He went back to his mixture over the charcoal furnace as the reporter left him. A shelf near was filled with bottles of various sizes and shapes. The supposition is that he took down the wrong one and added to his compound.

Crayton, just descending the steps, felt them rock under his feet, and heard a dull explosion. Mrs. Gerritt, in the opposite wing, was momentarily

stunned. The reporter, rushing in to burst open the door of the laboratory, was met and driven back by a sheet of flame. Out of the way as it was, and its timbers inflammable as tinder, the old house on the Manchester road was a holocaust which still could never suffice for the misery bred within its walls. From the still smoking ashes was taken a shapeless mass, which was given a burial in that same crowded, shadowed churchyard where Matthew Gregory had been laid.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AS IT WAS.

THE last of the dreary November days had worn away. December followed them and the new year was ushered in.

Mellow lights glowed in the parlor of the old mansion up among the Westmoreland hills. There have been changes there since the eventful night of Wilma's coming in from her walk to the doctor's house. An eventful night, and one when the saddening element held its supremacy, for Miss Erle, holding fast to her nephew's hand, had passed from a light slumber into a sleep which knows no waking, and at the same time, in the little bare cottage in the village, the anxiety which had awakened in the hearts of the watchers there was deepening, with how good cause they afterward knew.

Miss Erle was laid to rest beside her kindred, in a quiet spot there among her native hills, followed by the villagers, who, failing to appreciate all she had been to them in life, came to a recognition of the full measure of their loss with her death. Another funeral cortege at a later date, an imposing procession, went out from the Western avenue mansion, where the marble remains of that dearly loved wife of two husbands had been conveyed. A white tapering shaft in the Allegheny cemetery marks her grave, and the world is none the wiser for the painful drama of her life.

It is Ethel who sits in the parlor of the old house up in Westmoreland, this evening of the early new year. Miss Erle's will, which was never changed, had left the bulk of her property to Ethel. Besides there had been some charity bequests, and Erle would not hear to the renunciation which Ethel urged. The house in the city was unbearable with a sorrowful reminder at every turn; and it was Ethel herself who had proposed returning here. Captain Bernham and Wilma were here as well, at Mr. Richland's urgent solicitation. Their mutual grief had resulted in knitting those four more closely than the brightest prosperous friendships ever could have done.

Erle had gone back to Hetherlands, and despite his sincere mourning for his aunt, he was lighter-hearted on his journey than he had been for weeks before. The cause of it had come about most unexpectedly to himself. He had gone into Ethel's presence, one day, as the holidays were drawing close at hand, not shrinking from the duty which prompted him, but with a depression which revealed to himself how futile had been his effort to return the full ardor of his wandering devotion to the allegiance where, in all honor, it should belong. The trousseau had arrived and been packed away from sight, in those darker days, and no reference made to their previous plans, until Erle broke the subject, a trifle abruptly, on that occasion.

"It has come to a time when I must speak to you regarding our marriage, Ethel," he had said. "I leave it entirely to your decision if any change shall occur in our plans. It seems ill-advised to be speaking of this so soon after the sorrow which has come to us both, but ours has been a quiet, long-standing betrothal, and I think it is your brother's wish that there shall be little as possible deviation from our first arrangement. It is my desire as well; and if you also agree, we will still be married plainly and privately, upon New Year's Day."

There was a troubled light in the soft, hazel eyes, as Ethel heard him, but the pure fair face was quiet in its resolve.

"There must be a change in our plans, Erle—one of which I have been wishing yet dreading to speak to you. I scarcely know how to tell you, even now. This great grief of Gertrude's death, and the knowledge of all she had borne, has shocked me to a comprehension of the great wrong I might have done us both. I do not love you with the love I should hope to bear my husband, Erle; I know now that I never can. I would be doing a great wrong to marry you at all. Howard is needing me, too, and my duty, the gratitude and love I owe him in return for long years of watchful tenderness, is to devote myself to him from this time forth."

Erle made a remonstrance, pleaded strongly even while his heart beat quick at thought of regained freedom; but Ethel remained firm. And so, at last, he had accepted his dismissal at her hands, and gone back to Hetherlands. He had spoken no word to Wilma. She was so deeply under the cloud yet, of the sorrow which had come upon her; her first duty was owing yet to the father, who for so long a time had been bereft of wife and child. He could be content, he thought, with this measure of light-heartedness which had come to him—contented to wait a fitting time to tell his love again to Wilma.

Ethel, sitting alone, the firelight playing over the somber mourning dress she wears, the glow from the chandelier lighting the bright hair and the pearl-like face, is thinking sadly but not gloomily of the many changes. There will be still another one when spring opens. They have made all calculations for a trans-Atlantic journey—her brother, Captain Bernham, Wilma and herself. Her brother's failing health is the first object prompting the move, and it will be better for all of them to be removed from the associations of these familiar scenes. She is re-

calling some vague reminiscence of that other European tour, her brother's wedding-tour, when she was a very little child, as the door opens and she looks up and rises with a slight cry, as, with quick step, there advances to meet her—Justin Lenoir. She has thought him gone to his new field of action before this, and his sudden appearance is a surprise from which she does not recover at once. There is something which is not embarrassment, but an eager excitement kept down as he holds her hand for a moment and utters those commonplaces which people always use in greeting. She remarks her surprise and wonder, and he answers her. His book has delayed him. It is just out now, and he has his first assurance of its success. She has always been sure that it would succeed, and says so now, and it is a truth that he finds as much delight in her simple faith as with the favorable reviews with which the critics have seen fit to receive it.

"I shall be ready to go within another week," he said; "and this encouragement I have met has resulted in placing me better even than I hoped for in the new work I am to take up. I should have gone without seeing you again except for a recent chance meeting with Mr. Hetherville. (That chance meeting had cost Erle more trouble and maneuvering than either of them was ever to know.) Oh, Ethel, Ethel! I know that you are free of your own accord, and I dare to plead for myself what your heart withheld from him. I have loved you since we first met, up in the mountains, and I never could school myself quite to be reconciled at thought of ever losing you. It is asking much now and offering so little except my love, but if you can trust to that I shall be the most blessed of men; I shall strive to gain much for your sake as I never could have striven alone for my own advancement."

Ethel, finding her hand clasped in his again, saying not a word, did not resist when he drew her blushing, happy face down to his shoulder.

"My darling, my darling!" he repeated, accepting all that the concession from her meant. "My only love, and you were my love at first sight. Did you know that, Ethel? Tell me, my own, when did you know first that you could care like this for me?"

"When I met you first, pale and worn by overwork, last summer among the mountains," she answered, truthfully.

Mr. Richland was less surprised than Ethel had expected he would be when the announcement of this result was made known to him. The old pride, which had always been his worst fault, had been humbled. In its place had come a softer, better sentiment, which shone pre-eminently bright at what might have been a little lingering, concealed disappointment to him even now. But he had had his lesson, bitterly hard, and he was not lacking in approval of Ethel's choice.

The marriage was fixed to take place in early spring, and the time between seemingly flew away upon lightning wings. Lenoir was assured of obtaining leave of absence from his new situation, which he retained at his own and Ethel's desire, notwithstanding Mr. Richland's urgent representation that such a course was unnecessary, since Ethel and Ethel's husband should share equally of his bounty, but the young people were firm in declining his generosity.

"Justin has his own way to work out," Ethel said, with a glance which showed how entire her belief was that he would make it. "You must not spoil his chances by depriving him of a chief incentive, Howard."

Their plans had been changed only this far, that Ethel should return with her husband after a brief two months, leaving the remainder of the tourist party to their own time and their own pleasure on the other side of the ocean.

It was to be a very quiet marriage. An invitation was dispatched to Erle to be present upon the occasion, and a half a dozen hours after the letter containing it had been mailed he came in upon them unexpectedly—almost.

"You see the power of attraction was too strong for me," he declared, laughingly; and then heard with real pleasure the tidings he had crossed on the way.

Later that same day he succeeded in finding Wilma alone, and before she could even suspect his intention he had caught the slender little form close in his arms, his rippling golden beard swept across her dusky hair, and his bold, blue eyes looking down upon her caused her own shy, soft, dark ones to fall.

"Mr. Hetherville, for shame! Let me go!"

"You shall never, never go," he answered her, "never until you have promised to be my own loved, cherished wife. I don't exact any promise of your loving me," he laughed. "I am very sure of that already. Guileless little heart, it could not conceal the truth from me. I have your father's consent, Wilma. My own little love! Can you and will you be happy with me?"

"Dear Erle, so happy that I am frightened."

There was a double wedding, of course. Crayton was there and ate of the cake, and drank the health of the two young pairs, and was the wild, reckless Bohemian even under his forced good behavior of the day. He is that still, one of those talented men of good impulses and bad habits, who, with versatile ability will never achieve a point in life. As such, let us leave him, for there are sure to come darker hours and worse recklessness before he is done with life in the true Bohemian way.

THE END.

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